



나는 숨덕이다.

그러니까, '숨은 덕후' 혹은 '숨어서 오덕질 한다' 는 '숨덕' 을 말한다.

과거의 트라우마를 딛고 은성 고등학교에서 남몰래

숨덕 라이프를 즐기던 나 '강인진' 은

이 평온한(?) 나날이 오랫동안 지속하기를 바랬다. 그러나,

"1학년 7반 출석번호 1번 강인진, 너는 오덕이다."

들켰다. 그 미소녀, '서연지' 는 내 비밀을 폭로하고 학교에 알려지고 싶지 않다면,

자신과 함께 비밀 동아리, '숨덕부' 를 만들자고 협박해왔다.

숨덕부. 다름아닌 '숨은 덕후 활동' 을 위한 동아리라고?

천방지축의 연지에게 이끌려 천신만고 끝에 부를 만드는 것까지는 좋은데,

'대놓고 덕질' 을 하자고 주장하는 학교 최고의 덕후 '대덕여왕' 은예린과

격렬하게 대립하는 한판 대결을 벌이는 건 또 뭐야?

시드노벨 2회차 공모전 입선작,

숨은 오덕들에게 바치는 신감각 학원 일상 코미디 등장!

2012. 02. 01 발행



정가 6,800 원

이 작품의 저작권은 시드노벨에 있으며, 저작권법에 의해 보호를 받는 저작
물이므로 불법 복제와 스캔 등을 이용한 온 오프라인에서의 무단전재 및
유포 공유시 법적 제재를 받습니다.



숨덕부

오버정우기 지음

시드노벨



오버정우기 지음

Anmi 일러스트



YEONJI SAT DOWN ON THE BED WITH A SULLEN LOOK.

SEO YEONJI



AND NOW, WE WILL COMMENCE "OPERATION:
CLOTAKU CLUB ESTABLISHMENT."



".....THEN, LET'S TRY THIS."

YU YOUNGSEON

THE NURSE'S WHISPERS FELT LIKE A CHILLING
WIND SWEEPING ACROSS A GRAVEYARD.

"NEVERTHELESS, IT SEEMS I WILL HAVE TO TEACH
YOU WHO OWNS THE SUPERIOR OTAKU CLUB."



EUN YERIN

"HMPH, LIKEWISE!"

AS YERIN PUT THE RULE SHEET AWAY AND
PREPARED HERSELF, YEONJI HALTED HER.

I HAVE A PROPOSITION, ELIN YERIN.

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00:0

0. Prologue

I am a Clotaku.

A 'Clotaku' is, uh, it's just that.

That is, it's a portmanteau of 'Closet' and 'Otaku'. We try to appear to be normal people, while secretly keeping up with our Otaku lifestyle.

On an Otaku sliding scale, you could say it's on the opposite side of Pubtaku (Public Otaku).

...Wait, all of us already know what Otaku is, right? It's a pretty well-known word in our country at this point, so I shouldn't need to explain.

Okay, so.

Why do I keep it a secret?

It's a bit awkward explaining this as an Otaku, but our current society frowns upon the Japanophile group known as the 'Otakus'. Once you have the label of being an Otaku, your peers tend to view you differently, and even worse, you might become a social outcast.

Especially in school.

Elsewhere, you might get a weird look or two if you are found out (I personally believe this is a serious issue by itself), but in school, you could be outcast and bullied. Kids in school tend to be immature, so they are quick to reject whatever is considered unacceptable by the masses.

...And that's why I am a Clotaku – is what I believe.

Well, just like how we all have different opinions, I'm sure all the Clotakus in the world have different reasons. However, I already have experiences of some of the situations from before, and that's why I am a Clotaku.

If there's one thing special about me, perhaps it's that I am amazingly self-conscious about being an Otaku.

The ‘experiences’ I mentioned before still haunt me to this day, almost like a trauma, and thus from that day on, I decided to remain hidden from my school as a Clotaku.

Thanks to that, I safely got through my middle school years, even as a third year transfer student; and now, as a freshman in this high school, I continued being a dedicated Clotaku – was the kind of promise I made to myself, but one day,

“First Year Class 7, Attendance Number 1 Kang Injin— You are an Otaku.”

... A disaster struck my quiet life, only one month since the start of high school.

1. I am a Clotaku

And then the sound of the bell rang from the class's speakers.

"Stand straight, bow!"

"Thank you for the day!"

Following the synchronized bow from the students, the teacher left the class through the automatic sliding door.

The final class of the day had ended.

"Sheesh, I'm tired."

"Thought I'd pass out and die there."

The moment the teacher stepped out the class, the class was immediately filled with noises. A few impatient students hurried to leave; I only yawned and remained in my seat. The homeroom teacher should rush in anytime soon for the day-end lecture, anyway.

"... Sniff."

...I began tearing up from all the yawning. With my recently moistened eyes, I looked at the speakers that had just sounded the class bell.

...It struck me that those speakers must cost at least fifty thousand dollars.

Just as a thought: the school board had to be swimming in money. Even in my middle school, I had a culture shock from the never-ending demonstrations of modern technology; and this high school was on a whole new level.

Though, to be clear, it wasn't the school's side that had all the money; it was the corporation that's backing this school.

The Eunsung High School and the adjacent Eunsung Middle School were owned by the all-too-famous Eunsung Group Corporations. In other words, the schools were backed by one of the top mega-corporations of South Korea, and so it was obvious that every little thing in this school seemed futuristic and unfamiliar.

Of course, it wasn't too easy to get into a school like this. To qualify for this school, you must be in the top 1% in the national exam. And even if you succeed there, if your grades drop at any point, you get thrown out without any mercy, so...

Consequently, there were complaints that its students became enslaved to grades and such, but ultimately there were no limits to the number of people who wanted to attend this school. From Eunsung's point of view, it was a win-win situation.

Whoever graduates from this school would receive the unfair privilege of being guaranteed a high-paying job in Eunsung Corporations, so it wasn't such a surprise that they would pay no attention to what others speak of them.

"Hey, Injin, Injin!"

As I was spacing out, someone called my name. Two friends of mine were looking my way, grinning.

"Hey, Injin, now that the class is done, want to go to a PC Bang? I'm gonna teach this kid a lesson for beating me up in Starcraft."

"Try it. You think you're gonna micro better because you watch some pro games? You're both gonna type GG first."

"You son of a... then, the loser has to pay for lunch at McDonalds! Call?"

"Call!"

...Hey, does anyone know 'Pareto's Law'? For a given group of ants, 20% of it will be diligent workers, while the other 80% will slack off. And if you separate those diligent workers into a separate group, there will be a new 20/80 split – is how the law goes.

Likewise, while this school theoretically had the country's brightest students, we still had a big share of slackers who directly go to the PC Bangs after school.

That Pareto guy probably wanted to refer to this situation with his law.

"Sorry, I can't go with you today."

I answered, after my friends' little exchange. I tried to look as sorry as possible, as if I really wanted to go, but couldn't.

“Hey- don’t be like that and come with us, dude. I’ll even pay for your fees, if it comes down to it.”

It was a pretty attractive suggestion; if I weren’t an Otaku, I might have faltered. Perhaps I might even have played a game or two.

Unfortunately for me, the only games I play on the computer are *those* sorts of games.

...Uh, yeah, that is, *those*. Yes, the sort you have in your mind, yeah. Damn.

I’m not mentally ill or anything, so I don’t think I’ll ever find myself playing a visual novel in the middle of the sacred PC Bang. That’s why I don’t like going to one; there’s just nothing that I want to play.

Well, I don’t always decline my friends’ invitations; to become the greatest Clotaku, you must advertise with your actions, “I am just like you guys!” To keep up with your non-Otaku peers, you must learn to familiarize yourself with “trendy” things like popular music and gaming. Ultimately, I must keep others from discovering my *other* hobbies.

To summarize my secret Clotaku techniques:

1. Familiarize yourself with popular TV shows and movies.

You need to know some of the popular shows and movies by heart, so that you are always ready to discuss them with others. If that’s not possible, you should at least read a review or two about it.

2. Be active.

Men tend to enjoy being active. Maybe there are those who don’t, but it’s not really a bad thing to be active. During the physical education classes, don’t sit around in the shades, reading a book! Just get up and start running!

3. Dress smart.

For some reason, it’s an established general opinion that Otakus always dress like slob. In schools, it doesn’t really matter because of uniforms (fortunately), but outside of that, like a field trip, you need to have that fancy getup. Have something for those rare special occasions.

4. For those unfortunate moments where you end up in a karaoke, learn some popular songs.

At the start of the school years, or after a field trip, it's common to take a trip to the karaoke. It would be embarrassing to start singing anime songs, or end up sitting in the corner alone, so learn a song or two.

5. Don't react to the mention of the *other hobbies*.

It's rarer than getting hit by a lightning, but there may be times when your peers mention some anime or manga. At these times, if you overreact to them, your Clotaku days are over, so be careful. Remember, when you're talking to an average person, your knowledge is restricted to 'Two Piece' and 'Dhibli'. Do not release your power levels.

6. Make some non-Otaku friends!

There's a saying that Otakus mingle with other Otakus, but... it's not like schools only have Otakus, so it's important to make friends with everyone and keep friendly relationships. In any case, the common folk significantly outnumber us Otakus, so you need to learn to coexist with them. If people want to be friends with you, be friends with them. If you don't, you won't get another chance.

...And that's it. For your convenience, let me call this the '6 Laws of Clotaku'.

In my case, I've had misfortunes in the past, so it shows how I'm overly paranoid about being a Clotaku. But, if you're anything like me, I hope it can be a good guide for you. If you were to forget just one of these rules... further details will be omitted.

Anyway, this current situation was in the domain of the sixth law; make some non-Otaku friends. Although I wouldn't actually mind playing a game of Starcraft with them... but this day, I just couldn't.

That was because, after school... oh, I can't say it yet. For now, I will end it here.

"I really want to go today but I just can't. I have after-school classes."

I played my ace: the legendary 'Study Shield'.

In other words, it's just using studying as an excuse to go home.

While my friends may seem a little carefree, they were relatively hard workers. Even they must sometimes attend after-school classes or tutoring sessions, so they usually understand and let me go.

“Damn, really? Should’ve said it earlier. I guess we’ll just go by ourselves today.”

It’s an ace because it works. My steadfast friends finally gave up and left; I gave them back the “I really wanted to go with you~” face again.

“Why is it so noisy in here? Get back in your seats! I’m starting my final lecture!”

And then my homeroom teacher entered. Nice timing, there.

And then, I was dismissed from class.

After that last lecture, I bolted out of my classroom, laughing as if I had inhaled a can of nitrous oxide. If anyone were to see me then, they would have called the police to report a mental hospital escapee who had stolen a school uniform.

But who cares about that? I was simply euphoric at the time. Even if I were to lose all the save files for my visual novels, I would have been mildly annoyed and that would have been the end of it; I was pretty much high, then.

'Hey, you’re curious, right? Why I’m that happy, you’re curious, right? Yes, yes, please ask me! I beg you... yes? Why am I so happy, you ask? Ga-haha! Oh... that was a weird laugh, I’m sorry.'

Subconsciously, I made a sinister smile, looking around the vicinity. I made sure there was no one around. As I walked, I pulled out ‘that’ from my pockets.

It was a postcard with a cute picture of a little chick.

On top of that, there were letters, circular and shapely, undoubtedly written by a girl.

And its content...

〈I have something important to tell you. After school, find me behind the memorial. I’ll be waiting.〉

...was that.

...And that was why I didn't take up on my friends' invitation to go play games. Would *you* be abandoning a letter like this to go play games?

'Okay, anyway, I'm right, right? It's not just because I'm a 2D-addicted Otaku, anyone would think that this is a lo... lo... love letter, right? Right? Oh, oh... my God. Is this really a love letter for me? I can't believe it. Wait, before that, I can't even believe love letters exist in real life!'

One day, I just opened the shoe box as usual to go home, and this letter was shyly tucked away in the back – that kind of situation is really dreamy for the likes of us. I, myself, found this in my desk while pulling out a textbook (we actually don't have shoe boxes here). I panicked and thought up all sorts of wild explanations for this in my head, but in the end, I concluded that this can't possibly be anything but a love letter... and so I was there.

This school had a reputation for having the most studious students in the country, so it probably was not some muggers' plot to lure me into a secluded place and steal my money.

It was also not likely that it was a prank by my friends that I made since last month. All they do is play games after class, so how could they come up with a devious ploy like this?

In the end, I could only conclude that I had an authentic love letter

“Gahahaha...”

After making that conclusion, another silly laugh escaped my lips. Trying to stifle this laughter only made it worse.

“Pua-hahahahaha-!”

And so I looked around first, and allowed myself to erupt with all the built-up laughter. I feared that, if I hadn't laughed then, I'd do some very embarrassing things when I meet the girl.

'Oh, what kind of girl could she be? It's the age of cell phones and texting, and yet there's a girl who wrote a letter by hand! She's probably ladylike, composed, and

perhaps a bit shy, but in any case, a lovely girl. Gahaha... just look at these writings; you can just *feel* the writer's love within.'

It was behind the school memorial, too; ever since the Eunsung Corporations built this school, the only time a student would ever be here is during the entrance ceremony. That is, this place is usually completely empty.

'Heh heh, what does she have in mind, calling me to an isolated place like this? Maybe she just appears to be shy on the outside, but it might turn out that she's actually daring-- so maybe some chemistry will happen right here!'

...And such was the type of thoughts that raced through my head, which would make any girl scream and run away if she ever found out.

"...Was it this place?"

Behind the memorial, where the dense trees drew shadows that darkened the area, I paced around to look for the person who had called me here. Perhaps it was because of the trees, but I couldn't see anyone.

As a thought, this area was hidden from plain sight quite well.

I got to see the memorial itself not too long ago, but I never realized there was a place like this. As a passing comment, if I were to bury a dead body here, it would be the perfect crime; if this school were like any other, there would have been all kinds of delinquents gathering here.

'So, why would that girl call me to some hidden place like this...? Hee hee!'

While trying to fight off all these impure thoughts appearing in my head,

"Here."

A voice called.

Taken by surprise, I turned around; already next to the trees, staring in my direction was... a girl.

To explain a bit more, it was a cute girl.

Immediately noticeable was her small stature, her skin as white as a porcelain doll, smooth and cutesy face with long eyelashes, and two raised, glaring eyes-- her features were hard to forget.

Contrasting the bright skin was her long brown-black hair, flowing down her body. To say it again, I had never seen someone as cute as her before.

Because of her height, it was unbelievable that she's a high school student, but she was unmistakably wearing our school's uniform. She lacked her name tag, so I assumed that she was a freshman like I was (we didn't get them since we just got admitted to the school).



In any case, that did not matter in my situation, but...

...Okay, seriously, she was too much for me to handle.

Admittedly I live in real life by day and in 2D world by night, but I can still differentiate between them; it was already surprising that I got a love letter in the first place, but 'the girl who sent it was also the most beautiful girl I've ever seen'~~ simply doesn't sound like a realistic situation at all!

Though, there was something less than friendly about the expression in the eyes that were staring at me. At least, it was nothing like the expression of a girl who's in love.

Damn it all.

'Yeah, why would a girl like this ever like a guy like me... let me guess, she's probably going to ask me to introduce that popular guy Minchul to her. Yeah, it's probably that.'

Thinking this, my inflated hopes immediately receded like a popped balloon. This was some emotional roller-coaster.

"...Hey, why are you talking to yourself? I'm right here."

'Yeah, in all my 17 years of life, I've only been a visual-novel-playing robot... heh heh, heh, heh heh...' I thought to myself. The girl frowned, clearly offended by my behavior.

Intimidated by her sharp eyes and her cold tone, I removed all hopes from my mind.

"Ah, sorry... did you wait a while?"

This is probably what they call a fatigue high. After abandoning the last of my hopes, I felt like nothing was holding me down, allowing me to properly speak to this girl.

She scoffed quietly, and replied.

"About 10 minutes. Clearly our classes end at the same time, so why were you late? Next time, be quicker."

“... Sorry.”

I only asked her out of courtesy, so I didn't expect to get this kind of attitude.

In addition, the final lecture took unusually long, and I had all sorts of things crossing my mind while coming here, and I had to laugh my heart out before meeting her... but I shouldn't say any of this to her.

“Well, whatever.”

The girl finally spoke, while I made the ‘I'm sorry I was born’ face.

“Now, do you know why I brought you here?”

“...Didn't you mention that you wanted to say something to me?”

A few moments ago, I just thought it was a confession of love! Sorry! –I couldn't say this out loud, so I just asked her. I actually don't know what she wants, anyway.

“Yes, you're right.”

She turned her head slightly and cleared her throat. With a shaky voice, she continued.

“I guess you don't know. For the last many months, I was watching you.”

“What...”

Her words caught me off guard.

“Many months... you mean, since middle school?”

“Yes.”

She looked away as she replied. It almost looked like she was embarrassed.

Since middle school... I couldn't recall ever seeing her in Eunsung middle school. Granted, the middle school was ridiculously huge, so it was very possible that I never actually met her before.

Wait, no, forget the middle school.

Immediately after my hopes had sunken down like a destroyed submarine, the tension started to rise again. Barely keeping myself contained, I asked.

“O-okay... I never realized. But... why?”

The girl brought up her hand to her mouth and coughed quietly. Even objectively, she looked really cute there. I almost wanted to hug her right now.

“... I wanted to know more about you.”

Oooooooooohhhh!

If this were a sitcom, that would have been the noise from the audience.

So, um, that is, it's this, right? 'I... I'm interested in you!' is what she's saying, right? I'm not the only one who'd think this, right?

All my blood shot up to my head, and I could feel myself blushing. I only dreamed of it; is this seriously a love confession? She made me go 'Guess not, damn!' just few moments ago, and now she's unfairly catching me off guard like this!

As I wallowed in my pink-tinted panic, the girl continued talking.

“...But after middle school, our classrooms were too far apart to see you as often. Only now, I finally got to confirm my true feelings.”

What feelings? 'Feelings about my love for you', and such? Gahaha....Now, the remaining words must be 'So, I want to know more about you! I want to be with you!'

As I was swimming in euphoria, the girl quietly continued.

“Ahh... yes, I knew clearly then. I knew everything about you. I knew everything about the things you wanted to hide.”

“Ah?”

It wasn't 'I want to know more about you~', but it was 'I already know everything'.

And that's including the things I'm hiding... what did she mean? I was befuddled by the unexpected turn of events.

The girl slowly walked towards me.

And the final words that left her mouth were,

“First Year Class 7, Attendance Number 1 Kang Injin— You are an Otaku.”

2. The Meeting for Operation: Clotaku Club Establishment

The next day.

Until the classes had ended, I remained disoriented and confused.

I could not pay attention to the classes at all- when I got a pop quiz, I was stunned in place until the guy beside me whispered the answer. I lost my appetite, too, so I spent the lunch break resting my head on my desk.

I must have been visibly troubled all day, since the usual slackers did not come by to ask if I wanted to play outside or go get some food.

...But shouldn't they have asked if I feel alright, or how I'm feeling, if they are really my friends? Those bastards.

I could not answer them even if they asked, anyway...

From my mouth, only sighs escaped; and with my eyes, I only saw the darkness ahead. What have I ever done to deserve being thrown into this situation?

Staring aimlessly towards the teacher who seemed to be disregarding my terrible state, I recounted yesterday's events.

"You are an Otaku."

- The words that crept out between the tiny lips from the cute girl.

Understanding what that meant to me took longer than my first time attempting to decipher the contents of Nicomachean Ethics back in middle school. The conclusion that I had reached afterward was just the same: What kind of bullcrap is this?!

Okay, no, what she said to me was entirely true; I fully acknowledge that myself, but.

.....How did this girl find out?

I said it before, but I am a closeted Otaku.

I made sure to behave properly so that no one in school may find out my status as an Otaku, so how did I ever end up hearing those words?

The blush that I initially had on my face now held a different meaning. I could feel cold sweat dripping down my back.

Don't panic, Kang Injin.

This situation... it must be that; it's a Quick Time Event. If I miss a beat, it will be Game Over, but if I choose the correct action, I should be able to escape safely!

So the choices for my next action are...

1. Silence her by killing her.
2. Silence her by violating her.
3. Invade Japan.

"D... don't say such stupid things... aha, hahaha, ahahaha."

.....And that's why you should never relate real life to games.

I racked my brains seeking better words, but that was all I could say for now.

And I also panicked and blurted out a Japanese stock phrase! Am I an idiot?!

"It's too late to try and hide it."

Despite my desperate defense, this kid (she didn't even deserve 'this girl' anymore) jeered at me with a sadistic expression.

"I told you, I confirmed all of my suspicious about you. Of course, I have tangible evidence for my argument. Kang Injin, without a single shred of doubt, you are the very model of this generation's Otaku."

T-tangible evidence? What is she talking about?

Instinctively, I reached for my coat pockets for the MP3 player, and then my backpack for the PXP.

As a Clotaku, who does not have Otaku activities in school, there were only two things that could be considered as tangible evidence.

In the two devices, within my maze of nested folders were various anime songs and this season's anime.

I thought that maybe they've been stolen, but fortunately the MP3 player and the PXP were in their original locations. As I sighed out of relief, she resumed talking.

"Hehehe, you can relax. Even I wouldn't touch others' private property."

"... Well, I appre..."

"Well, other than sneaking in every lunch break to check what you have in there."

"...ciate none of it--!"

I'm pretty sure that's just as serious as thievery! And, really, lunch breaks? All those times when I left my stuff alone to play soccer or get food? Oh, God, no.

I'm sure we all agree that it's beyond distasteful to have strangers look through our computers or laptops.

Remembering what I had in my PXP, I felt my face get redder than Antares (Alpha Scorpii, red supergiant star, reddest star visible on Earth).

Th-then... that thing in my folders, it...

Gaah! Did you find that, too? There's no way you saw it! Tell me that you didn't!

Then this kid threw the finishing blow.

".....You're a pervert."

"Why do I have to hear that from someone who stole my PXP to look through it?! Shut your mouth!"

The damage to my mental health was immeasurable. I felt like I could burst into tears at any moment.

As I crumbled down, as if her cute appearance was a lie, she revealed her true face.

With a sinister laughter, she crossed her fingers like an evil villain and continued.

"Kukuku... And that's not all. You're currently playing a visual novel called 'The Promise I Made over that Indigo Sky', yes?"

"H-how did you...!"

At this point I realized that my resistance is futile, so I revealed my honest surprise.

"Among my 'tangible evidence' is a video record of your first time playing that game. I even captured the time back when your mail was delayed, then the game arrived eventually, and you were dancing around like a..."

"Hey, hey, hey, hey!"

Is she crazy? How did she film me while I was in my own room?! What's going on here?!

It just seems unlikely that any of it actually happened, though. She smiled like the devil, briefly looked impressed, and spoke.

"Anyway, you must be very dedicated to order official release versions from overseas. You're much more of a model Otaku than I initially believed. I commend you for that."

"I'm not happy about it at all--!"

The only reason I can play the original versions is because a friend in Japan keeps sending them without being asked! So please don't give me that look!

As I felt my internal organs tie up from embarrassment, she scoffed and resumed talking.

"Hmph, you don't need to be embarrassed. 'The Promise I Made over that Indigo Sky' is truly a masterpiece."

"You admit that it's a masterpiece?!"

"The greatest part was when Asakura Naoki lies to the protagonist and the protagonist chases her."

"Hey--?! Do you realize you just cut down my will to play the game by half?! I was just on Naoki's route!"

"Rinne confesses her love to the protagonist at a hot springs resort, Mizuho loses her memory after a car accident then gets better, Yumi has a wardrobe malfunction at the beach and starts having feelings for the protagonist after that."

"....."

We weren't together for too long, but it was fun, 'The Promise I made over that Indigo Sky'...

I was suddenly depressed thanks to the overload of spoilers. However, through that previous discussion, I noticed something strange.

".....Wait, how do you know so much about the game?"

"That's because I'm an Otaku."

She answered as if it were a needless question.

I should have known from the way she talked. There was no other conclusion to reach from a girl who knew a visual novel title like that, but... it was unbelievable that there exists a cute Otaku girl.

"In any case, the only thing that matters now is that I have such evidence, isn't it?"

Completely ignoring the angry glare that I had on my face, she casually changed the topic.

In retrospect, I still haven't found out what was her reason for going through all this trouble.

She laughed sinisterly once again.

"I worked so hard to acquire this evidence. You were doing really well at covering your tracks."

She made a terrifying expression, like a kid burning ants with a magnifying glass. If I saw anyone making this face, I'd immediately know that I should never get close.

"Being a strict Clotaku like this means that you want to remain hidden from the school, right? Then, if I post these videos online....."

Of course.

Wielding my most feared nightmare as a weapon, she threatened me.

"Kuh....."

A chill ran down my spine.

As she had said, if anyone in school saw the video... my life would be over. All my efforts to maintain a facade would be ruined, and my former friends would probably label me as some pervert who plays H-games all day.

Masterpiece or not, that means nothing to the outside world. To others' eyes, it only needs to be in the category of H-games to be condemnable. I would not be able to make excuses.

If she, herself, got caught spreading this video, she would not be safe, either, but.....

I quickly peeked at her.

Her adamantly closed lips showed how determined she was to get what she desired. Her shining black eyes looked directly at me, announcing that she would never back away.

..... This girl. My senses are telling me that she's prepared to do whatever it takes to reach her goals. Damn.

I raised my arm to wipe off the sweat dripping down my face. Then I heard a dejected, tired voice escaping my own lips.

".....What are your demands?"

"Phew--"

Accepting my defeat, she quietly chuckled.

Contrasting her evil grin from before, she laughed like an innocent child,

momentarily making my heart skip a beat.

.....Although, I still don't know what kind of demands I'd get from this girl. I think I'm a weird person myself for having this kind of feeling for someone like her.

What could she want so earnestly that she needed to exploit my weakness?

As a variety of thoughts that mixed reality and delusions rushed through my head, she finally opened her mouth and spoke.

"You will help me start a school club."

* * *

... Okay, that happened.

To summarize the previous events, this Injin guy was found out by a mysterious girl that he is an Otaku, and so he was forced into helping her start a school club.

Honestly, I had no idea what was going on.

She never explained the very basics, such as what purpose the club will serve. All she said was 'I will tell you in the meeting tomorrow', then she just disappeared.

Hey, I found out one thing. Her name is Seo Yeonji.

It was good to know; though she only informed me in the last second, after momentarily reappearing, then quickly disappearing again.

Knowing her name, I could ask around the school about her so that I may understand more of her intentions; however, asking around 'Does anyone know Seo Yeonji? What kind of girl is she?' in an unfamiliar classroom was not something I'd ever do.

Moreover, even if I did ask and learn more, it could not change the fact that I was getting blackmailed into doing what she wanted...

...As long she had that 'tangible evidence'.

"Damn, this is frustrating."

I've spent all of my classes pondering, but no great plans came to my mind.

Though she had said that she was watching me for many months, I had never seen Seo Yeonji in my life. Naturally, I had absolutely no clue what kind of 'club' she wanted.

In the end, I had no choice but to partake in that 'meeting' to understand her motives.

For the moment, I gave up thinking about it.

With the billionth sigh I've had today, I waited for the classes to end.

* * *

After school, I nervously paced around the school's front gate.

Recalling yesterday's discussion, Yeonji had only said 'tomorrow's meeting', so she had no mention of where and when this was happening. That girl was incredibly unhelpful.

I did not know the exact location of her homeroom, so I had no choice but to wait here. It occurred to me that I looked incredibly suspicious here, waiting around the front gates while everyone else was going home.

Yeah, it got pretty embarrassing, having to wait at the front gates alone...

Standing here alone like a gatekeeper, I could feel my face redden from the passing glances given by the last group of students who were leaving.

So please show yourself~ I prayed.

She never showed up.

Maybe I couldn't see her because of her short stature? No, actually, being too short is a notable feature on its own; if she were included in the groups of students, I would have noticed her easily.

Perhaps she was still in school.

Imagining her still sitting alone in class, enraged at me, terrible fear struck my heart. After the school courtyard became devoid of students, I scouted around all of the first year classrooms... but all of them were empty.

What the hell?

I panicked and searched the area behind the memorial, even calling out her name, but she was not there.

.....Did she actually forget?!

I laughed in resignation.

She randomly told me 'tomorrow's meeting' and nothing more, then she had just gone home alone. There should be a limit to how selfish someone can be.

Had she changed her mind about starting a club after all?

If she at least told me how to contact her, I could at least ask her what's up. I couldn't do much when I didn't know anything other than her name.

In the off chance that she was waiting in a different area, getting angry alone, I took a tour around the second and third year classes, but... she was not there, either.

"...I should go home."

One hour had passed since the end of school.

I could not find Yeonji anywhere in school, so I left and dragged my tired body back home.

I wonder what was with that girl.

All day today, I was worrying about what kind of things might happen in that 'meeting', but I did not expect at all that she would simply not show up.

I began questioning if yesterday's events were all in my head, sneaking a look behind my back every now and then to see if she was right behind me.

Maybe I was frankly looking forward to the meeting.

* * *

It takes about 15 minutes to travel from my house to the school.

Usually, that would be true, but today's trip felt like it took ten minutes longer than usual.

Likely it was because I kept looking around me to see if Yeonji would pop out from somewhere.

Well, she still did not show up.

"Sheesh."

I felt melancholic. I shook my head, trying to get rid of all these strange thoughts.

I entered the password to my apartment building's front door and headed for the elevator.

This may seem extremely plain, living in a common apartment building like this. In anime or manga, just about everyone seems to live in a big two-story house, but that's just unrealistic for people living in dense cities like Seoul.

I got on the elevator and pressed the button for the 12th floor. I turned on the MP3 player, hoping to forget about my worries from today, listening to anime songs.

When the elevator doors opened, Yeonji was there.

"....?!"



Reacting to the 'ding~~' sound, I took a step forward by habit, and froze in place.

Right beside the front door to my home was the girl, looking like an abandoned kitten.

"You....."

Before I could say anything, Yeonji exploded forward like a predator that found its prey. Breathing wildly, she ran towards the elevator and put her foot between the closing doors and forced her way inside.

"You idiot, why are you so damn late?!"

After she entered the elevator with me, she immediately began kicking me. What are you doing?!

"You... how did you...?"

"I was waiting here for an entire hour! Seriously, my stomach is grumbling, my legs are tired, I'm bored, why are you here this late?!"

I could not have a normal conversation with her. Yeonji went berserk and savagely kicked me, and although it did not hurt too much, the elevator was shaking around dangerously.

I quickly made excuses to calm her down.

"I, I didn't know you'd be here! I thought you were waiting in school. I was looking for you there, so that's why I'm late!"

Yeonji ceased kicking. Already she seemed amazingly tired from all the kicking and punching, as she was drawing heavy breaths.

"Phew, phew... really...?"

"Yes, really! You never told me where we're going to meet in the first place!"

My desperate plea left me breathing heavily, too.

Yeonji looked sorry, and made a weird 'Nyuu--t' sound.

With a slightly reddened face, she replied.

"Alright, so let go of me."

"Huh?"

It finally came to my attention that my hands were seizing both of her arms. I must have done that while I was trying to stop her from hitting me. I quickly let go of her arms.

"S-sorry."

".....No, it's okay."

She replied with a face that said the contrary, continuing her heavy breathing. She looked like she would attack me again at any moment, so I quickly changed the conversation.

"So, how did you even find where I....."

Ding-!

I turned around, alerted by the familiar sound. The elevator was already at the sixth floor while my attention was elsewhere. Someone must have called for the elevator while we were causing a ruckus in the elevator.

"Now arriving at the sixth floor."

Following the robotic voice, the elevator doors slid open. A familiar woman from the sixth floor entered, holding shopping bags.

"....."

The woman inspected the scene in the elevator, and pressed the button to the first floor. We remained silent as we waited.

I wonder what the lady thought, seeing 'a boy and a girl who were in a wildly swinging elevator, with disheveled clothing and reddened faces'. Enduring her judging eyes, I kept my mouth shut. When we arrived at the first floor, the woman gave us a final look before leaving.

.....Wait, hold on, um, just wait, hold it.

Yeonji awkwardly coughed.

"...Well, the reason I'm here is..."

"Don't answer it now--!"

I'm pretty sure that lady mistook this situation for something else! That lady, she's friends with my mom!

As I was struggling at the sight of my impending doom, Yeonji responded in an extremely neutral tone.

"Whatever. She's a stranger, anyway."

"Maybe to you! I see her every morning!"

Hey, the boy from apartment 1202 brought a cute girl home and did this and that in the elevator~~ If a rumor like that spread in the neighborhood, I will kill myself.

As I began thinking of a way to stop the rumor from spreading, Yeonji stared at me, annoyed.

"Hmph, like I said yesterday, I'm here for our meeting."

She really didn't care about what could happen to me. I replied with a massive frown on my face.

"A meeting?"

"Yes, it's a meeting about creating our club."

Yeonji spoke with crossed arms, light beaming from under her thin eyelashes.

"That's acceptable, but why were you waiting in front of my house?"

If you wanted to meet me, you could have just waited outside the school. Why were you just sitting outside the doorstep like a little cat?

...Wait, that aside, how did she get into this building? The front gates are

password-locked. How did you get in here?

"I waited for someone else to open the door for me, and I slipped past the open door."

It was a straightforward reply. I never knew the security here was that loose.

Yeonji continued.

"To answer why I'm here, of course, it's to have our meeting at your house."

"Ahh, I see... wait, what?!"

I almost agreed, until the words registered in my head. Yeonji looked at me like I was an idiot, rolled her eyes, and said,

"Is it strange to have a meeting at a member's house?"

"No, that's not the problem!"

Strange or not, my mom is inside the house right now! If I just brought this girl inside, it's obvious how that woman would react! It's not something I want to see for myself!

"But, we can do it at your... damn, I mean, we can do it at a local cafe or some other place!"

I quickly corrected myself before I blurted out 'your house'.

It may be weird enough for two high schoolers to be together at a cafe, but it's a hundred times better than being at my house!

Yeonji shook her head.

"I don't want to spend money for anything unnecessary. Also, this meeting is extremely important. If others were to know of our plan, it could get catastrophic."

Was she planning on committing treason?!

The elevator arrived back at the 12th floor while I stammered to form a coherent reply. Noticing my agitation, Yeonji made an evil smile and taunted.

"And you, you said you would help me create a club. So provide us with a place to hold a meeting."

Was it just my imagination that it sounded like 'If you don't, these videos will be spread all over the Internet'...?

I had no ways to avoid this. Feeling like I just chewed on a roach, I brought her into my home.

* * *

Well, in anime or manga, normally, the protagonist's parents are never seen in their house. Sometimes the protagonist is an orphan, sometimes the parents are working out-of-country, and ultimately the main characters always get to be alone.

... I realized now why it's always like that. In cases like these, it becomes a huge hassle.

"...I'm back--."

Tossing my shoes aside and entering the living room, I looked around and announced my return, hoping that no one would be home.

Crushing my hopes, various sounds from the television escaped from the bedroom. As I frowned, Mom said the usual "Welcome back, son!" and revealed herself.

"My baby, why were you late today? You could at least tell me if you were going to be late... oh, my."

She expressed her surprise as she spotted Yeonji behind me.

At the moment the 'Who is that?' expression showed, I began stuttering.

"Uh, s-so this girl is....."

I opened my mouth, but I could not pick the right words to say. I couldn't say 'the girl who recently began blackmailing me', and yet I still couldn't say anything positive, due to my fear of being misunderstood.

Yeonji stepped forward.

"Hello, I'm Injin's friend from school."

I silently questioned her with my eyes how we ever became friends, but Yeonji cleanly ignored me and kept talking.

"I apologize for intruding, but I wish to have a discussion about a school project at your house. Is it okay?"

It was a polite and professional tone. I have no idea where she suddenly learned to talk like that.

"Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my."

Breaking my daze from seeing Yeonji's new attitude, Mom began blabbering. What's wrong with you, woman?

"Of course you can~ is it going to take a while? Would you like to have dinner with us before you leave? You are so cute, you're cuter than the last girl my son brought!"

Mom suddenly began blurting out words. Yeonji stared back at me as if she were looking at trash.

"...You brought a girl home before, too? You perverted animal."

"...It was for a school project. It wasn't just us two, there were three men and one girl!"

Frantically making excuses was quite difficult to do while whispering.

Yeonji scoffed in reply and asked where my room was. I showed her the way to my room and followed after...

"Son, wait!"

...an interruption. I knew it.

"What do you want now?"

"It's not what I want. We have a guest here, so shouldn't we treat her as such and serve some snacks? You're going to get angry if I bring it in the room myself, so I'll

prepare them and you can bring them in."

"Ugh....."

Being repeatedly called 'son, son' in front of a girl my age was pretty embarrassing. I hurriedly pushed Yeonji into my room as she observed our exchange, and Mom began whispering.

"Who is that girl, son? She looks just like a doll! I wish I had a daughter like her."

Come on, Yeonji already said 'friend from school'.

I sighed. Just as I worried, my mom interpreted this situation in a completely different way. I guess this kind of thing happens when you become a parent.

"It's nothing, seriously. Just a friend from school....?"

Before I finished repeating Yeonji's pretext, I closed my mouth. Yeonji was peeking out from my room to signal me with her hands. What.

I left Mom alone and walked over to Yeonji. She asked with a muffled voice.

"When's your birthday?"

"What?"

"I said, when's your birthday?"

Where is she going with this?

"Eh..... so the time of my birth, right?"

"...Why are you repeating what I said? So anyway, birthday."

"So, it's July 27th..."

Honestly, why are you even asking me that? I answered out of pressure, and Yeonji disappeared into the room again without a reply.

"...What the hell was that?"

I pondered as I walked back to Mom, now noticing that she was now holding a plate full of snacks and drinks. I took the plate and turned around, and Mom teased in a quiet voice.

"It would be helpful if I left, right? Is an hour long enough?"

"...Don't you leave this house!"

I already know that you're going to go around the neighborhood to say 'My son brought a cute girl and told me to leave the house for a bit~'!

Moments later.

Only after forcing Mom to go back to quietly watching the television, I could go back in the room with the plate in my hands.

I still wonder why Yeonji asked for my birthday.

I was thinking about the reason through the mishap with my mom, but nothing came to my mind why she would want to know about my birthday.

Frankly, it was the first time being asked about my birthday by a girl, so I got slightly excited.

...She's not thinking about giving me something for my birthday, is she?!

As I was having that thought, I felt a tingly sensation. I felt like my face was turning red, so I took deep breaths before entering the room.

I don't have to knock, do I? It's my own room, after all.

With a completely random thought, I turned the doorknob and entered the room. And the first thing that came in sight was...

Miss Seo Yeonji (age 17), attempting to brute-force her way past the login screen of my computer.

"Whaaat-are you doooooooooiiiiinnnnnnng--?!"

I screamed like an Otaku faced with the danger of a three-year-old cousin touching

a pricey figma. Yeonji kept calm and shortly replied,

"What do you think...? As you can see, I'm trying to log in to this computer."

"If there's a lock on it, don't try to get past it-! How can you act like it's a completely normal thing to do, dammit?!"

"When a female character is in a boy's room, it's normal to look for dirty secrets!"

As if there's actually a Korean high school student who hides that kind of thing in his own room! While my jaw dropped in horror, Yeonji grinned mischievously and continued.

"Well, this is South Korea, land of the Internets. I thought that, instead of searching under your bed, if I searched your computer, there would be all sorts of pussycat videos, pussyfooting photos, pussytoe animations, all that stuff. It's a type of localization."

"It's a completely unnecessary localization!"

And you're barely censoring your words!

"So anyway, come here and unlock this. I can't get through it with just your birth date."

"THAT'S why you asked for my birthday--?!"

It never occurred to me that she would have had a terrible goal like that.... What a sad twist! And I'm an idiot for having expected anything else!

Yeonji commented without a single ounce of shame.

"Many kids these days don't realize how insecure they are, keeping birthdates as their password. It's too bad you're not like them."

I couldn't possibly be more thankful for having a strong password than right now. I felt gratitude towards my past self for saving me at that moment.

Yeonji, however, persisted.

"So, you should unlock your computer right now. Hurry, my fingers are getting

tired."

"Do you realize how wrong it is to use 'so' as a conjunction there...?"

I pushed away the girl who ordered 'please enter your password so that I may see your secret files'. Then I forcibly shut down the computer.

"Ah, what are you doing, you idiot?!"

Yeonji became furious and kicked me with her stocking-clad foot. Who are you to ask me that question?

"I don't care what you say to me, I am not going to reveal my buttonquails, cockatoos, swallowtails, and bronze cuckoos so easily. Give it up."

"Why do you have so many bird folders?!Hmph, well, fine. I probably don't need to see any of it today."

Fortunately, she gave up. I sighed in relief like Zhang Fei must have done after guarding that bridge alone in Changban.

Yeonji sat down on the bed with a sullen look.

"...And now, we will commence 'Operation: Clotaku Club Establishment'."

...A what club?

* * *

"I said, 'Operation: Clotaku Club Establishment'."

That was the summary to Yeonji's reply to my request of 'could you repeat that, please?'.

I wanted to know why a 'meeting' became a big 'operation' suddenly and why it became so complicated, but that wasn't important. The problem is the following.

" 'Clotaku Club'... what do you mean by that?"

"Namesake, of course."

I don't get it at all.

Yeonji made a shrill voice like a cat who had its tail stepped on.

"As I said-- as the name implies, it's a club where Clotakus hide from the public to do Otaku activities."

After all that, what Yeonji wanted was just an Otaku-related club, like an anime or manga club. I did expect this to be the case, but still.

Yeonji sneered at me just as I believed I had her figured out.

"Heh... you're probably thinking that it's just some average anime club, right?"

Then, are you saying it's some abnormal anime club?

Yeonji added with a grimace.

"The true meaning of this club is in 'Clotaku'! It's all about the unsociable Otakus meeting up, hiding away from class for Otaku activities, much like forming a cancerous tumor!"

Don't compare your own club to cancer-- was my thought, but I did not actually vocalize it. Yeonji continued.

"Kang Injin, why are you a Clotaku?"

"Hmm....?"

It was a very fundamental question. Why, of course I'm a Clotaku because...

"It's because you're afraid of what others think, yes?"

She answered her own question. I reluctantly agreed with her, and Yeonji nodded excitedly.

"Yes, we have plenty of Otakus in this country, but this society does not treat them like humans! It's much like the serfs of the High Middle Ages of Europe, or the Asiatic people in America during World War II!"

Her preferred area of research must be history.

"However, disregarding this outrage, there is also fault in the actions of the Otakus who force their hobbies onto others. So, being a Clotaku means being seen as normal on a personal level, and slowly improving the Otakus' social acceptance on a national level."

...Was being a Clotaku that profound? Yeonji continued without a single pause.

"But being a Clotaku is not an easy task. Sometimes you have to forcibly change who you are, and ultimately it is extremely stressful to be able to express yourself on the Internet only."

"Okay, I agree that it's tough being a Clotaku... but isn't it okay to keep everything on the Internet? Is it mandatory to do that offline?"

After hearing my question, Yeonji grinned.

"Heh. Kang Injin, when you talked about those things with me yesterday, you honestly enjoyed it, didn't you?"

"Oh...."

By yesterday, did she mean by that? About the time I talked to her about 'The Promise I Made over that Indigo Sky'...

Although the entire story was spoiled for me, and all my efforts to play the game after having waited for many weeks were in vain, but... clearly, when I talked to Yeonji about the game, I had a scarcely positive mood.

As a man accustomed to being a Clotaku, the mere action of speaking to another human being about a visual novel was an experience of great amazement that could never be felt online.

"Well, uh... it was a bit fun."

It was not a great deal at all, but strangely, I had difficulty saying so.

Yeonji looked displeased with my words that I had stuttered out.

"Hmph, I was having a lot of fun..."

"What?"

"I-it's nothing!"

I only asked because I could not hear her, but she violently shook her head and began punching down my bed. Stop doing that to someone else's bed!

"A-anyway, Otakus are humans. We're still social animals. I believe that it's unhealthy to be ourselves only online! That's why we need the Clotaku Club! We need a place where only Clotakus can gather so that no others may know of our existence!"

"Hmm...."

I assessed her words.

The theory behind her reasoning was logical. Last year, I had an experience where I went 'I'm jealous~ I want to join them~' at a group of Otakus having a discussion.

... I just could not join them as I was afraid of being labelled an Otaku myself.

However, as a club operated by Clotakus, it was possible to never have opposition from anyone, and as Yeonji expected, we could finally be ourselves within the club.

Ideally, this theory was perfect. Just ideally, but...

"But, is it even possible to operate a club like that in hiding?"

That was the main problem. I wished to know if such a clandestine group could be established in a school like ours.

While I don't have a perfect understanding of our school yet, I know that clubs are very busy here. Aside from them being busy, establishing and maintaining clubs could get very difficult; non-academic clubs tend to be ignored entirely, and even after creation, clubs that do not have any successes get mercilessly dissolved.

Hence, even if the school boards go crazy and green-light the establishment of Clotaku Club, we have to produce notable results that can be seen by others to stay alive. The reason behind creating Clotaku Club and the necessary actions to keep Clotaku Club were in direct opposites.

The Clotaku Club should be created to keep Otaku activities hidden, but to maintain the club we must practice our activities in public. There could be no sillier

dilemma than this.

"To my knowledge, we also need at least 5 people to start a club in this school. Will we be even able to find actual 'closeted Otakus' so easily?"

As I carefully pointed out the faults of 'Operation: Clotaku Club Establishment', Yeonji replied with the expression of Zhuge Liang as he waited for Sima Yi to fall into his traps.

"Heh.... I already knew that much. If we attempt to make our club officially, we'll end up writing reports and stuff and it will get pretty annoying. We can't possibly act like proper Otakus in that situation."

Yeonji lifted her legs from the floor and sat cross-legged on the bed. Please don't sit like that with a skirt in front of a guy.

After making it difficult for me to acquire good viewing angles, Yeonji spoke firmly like a judge making the final sentence.

"So, our Clotaku Club will be a perfectly unlawful, secret club!"



...The appreciation I had for this club just got thrown out of the window!

"W-what do you mean unlawful..."

"I mean that we won't try to get the school board's approval."

Yeonji spoke nonsensically, her small chest heaving in excitement. As I remained in silence to think of a proper rebuttal, Yeonji casually spoke like a sage who had just understood the nature of the universe.

"Come to think of it, even if we get the school's approval, all they will do is spare us a few coins and assign us a miniscule club room. We might as well forget about getting an approval."

I don't know about getting funding, but I'm pretty sure we need a club room!
We're making a club here!

"In addition, if we skip the approval, we don't have to go through the trouble of finding five Clotakus!"

She was uninterested in the very necessary step of finding actual members for the club. Someone like her could easily find five Clotakus, I was sure.

"Proper Clotakus won't reveal themselves so easily, you idiot. Even if we find a starting point, it's going to take several months to get them to admit it. I'm too lazy."

I had asked 'Why don't you gather some people the same way you exploited my weaknesses before', and that was her angry response. I couldn't tell if she was being eager or lazy about making this club.

"But you did that to me."

"..... Nyu."

I protested so I could reorient this plan to be more lawful, then she made that

weird noise again. After nervously twiddling her small toes inside her stockings, Yeonji raised her reddened head and had a tantrum.

"A-anyway! Our club is going to be perfectly illegal! Even if we can somehow make it legal, we're not gonna do it!"

How stubborn can she get?

In our silence, she stared at me with eyes as dark as black pearls, and lifted herself up from the bed.

"I already have a concrete plan for acquiring a club room. Tomorrow, we will discuss 'Operation: Club Room Takeover'. We're going to need a computer tomorrow, so have one ready."

The name of the mission already had an unlawful impression. Wait, before that...

"Hey, you, are you going come here tomorrow, too?"

After standing up, somehow managing to remain below my height as I sat, she nodded.

"Tomorrow and onwards, until we have a club room, this will be the temporary meeting room. You better come earlier tomorrow. If you're late again, I'll behead and dismember you."

Yeonji replied with a cute face.

Someone, please explain why I have to be beheaded and dismembered for being late to my own room.

"This meeting is adjourned. I'm gonna go home now. See you tomorrow."

After saying nothing but her demands, Yeonji wore her backpack to leave. Mom asked her if she wanted to have dinner with us, but she declined, saying she needed to get back before night.

"Phew--."

I saw Yeonji the door and returned to my room. I changed into fresh clothes and jumped on my bed.

It felt like so many things happened today. My mind and my body failed, being weary of today's events. I wanted to lay down a long time motionless without a single ounce of care; not even for tonight's dinner.

"'Clotaku Club', huh..."

Sprawling on my bed, I recounted today's events.

I chuckled quietly, remembering the unending fountain of energy bursting from her small body, delivering a grand speech whilst cross-legged on my bed.

...'Clotaku Club' sounded a little stupid, though.

"Well, whatever."

There wasn't much else I could do. I guess I should continue abiding by her plans.

It wasn't that I liked or agreed to Yeonji's plans, it was because Yeonji knew my only weakness. And, if that club never gets established, my room could be invaded every day, so that was another problem.

...Those are the only reasons. I swear.

In other news,

Because I forgot to silence Mom due to my lamentable condition, I was questioned by my father about Yeonji over the dinner table. I wish I could die.

Also, when I went to bed, I remembered that she sat down on my bed just today... there was some strange fragrance, I could say. Anyway, I could not sleep at all.

...I blame that girl for everything.

3. The Meeting for Operation: Clubroom Takeover

And again, the next day;

After school, I was greeted by the familiar little girl crouched at my front door.

"So, why are you always sitting there?"

She could always wait for me in front of the school gates and join up with me from there; what a strange girl she was.

Her answer to my question was,

"Hmph, if I'm seen walking with you, others might get the wrong idea."

How nice of her to say that.

However, regardless of her twisted inner nature, she was undeniably pretty. If I were to be seen by anyone I know while accompanying her, it may potentially evolve into bigger hassles...

...But that was only a lie I wanted to believe.

"...We need to get there slowly, I think--."

Yeonji looked like she murmured something. I had no chance to decipher her mutters while healing from the slight crack in my ego. Sorry!

"A-anyway, there's no problem if you just get here earlier! Just open the damn door."

"...Okay."

I wish I knew how she can so easily conjure up the courage to demand others to let her invade their homes. I reluctantly accepted and opened the door.

At Yeonji's second intrusion, Mom reacted as I had feared.

"Oh, oh my, hello again! Welcome, welcome. You must have dinner with us today. I'll even drive you back home~~."

"....."

I felt a piercing headache.

I better quickly make that damn Clotaku Club or whatever happen, and stop Yeonji from ever coming back here.

As I made that promise to myself, which would please Yeonji greatly if she found out, I sealed Mom in her room and joined with Yeonji in my own.

"Hey, turn on the computer."

Yeonji commanded me as soon as she had entered the room. Like a dirty nobleman demanding 'Strip off your clothes and lay down, slave!' her tone was autocratic but natural.

As a relevant side note, there was only a single chair in my room. After I turned on the computer for her and relaxed on my bed, I could only blankly observe her actions from afar.

The startup process finished and the desktop wallpaper (it was the default image; I already changed it yesterday) revealed itself.

"Hmph."

Apparently displeased at the green meadows under the blue skies within my desktop, she scoffed. What's wrong with that?

"Fine."

Following that curt response, Yeonji laid her small hand on the mouse and double-

clicked on the icon for 'My Computer'. Then she checked the 'Properties' menu on my disk drives, picked the one with the largest size, and began a search for '.avi' files.

Whoa.

Sure, I saw this coming from a mile away... but she actually did it while I was directly behind her, watching her every move. What a scary girl!

Although her 'pussycat videos excavation' from yesterday was clearly engraved in my memory... she must have taken me for an idiot, thinking that I would make the mistake of keeping incriminating files after she had told me that she would use my computer today!

Those pussycat videos you are looking for were... heh, they were all transferred to my external hard drive! Good luck finding them!

"....."

... However, I did have a terrible realization about myself when I saw the total size of the files that I had transferred.

I stared at her with a jumbled feeling between anxiety and confidence. Meanwhile, Yeonji initiated multiple searches at once with a variety of advanced search functions involved.

From .avi, there were searches for .mp-, .wmv, .flv, .asf, and when there were no results, she moved onto .zip, .jpg, .gif, .bmp, and finally .txt.

Of course, she could not find anything that was of great importance. I already searched for them myself in case I left a stray file.

I wanted to break out in a mocking laughter; I restrained myself in fear for the stocking-clad kicks in my way. In any case, God bless South Korea, the land of IT.

"Nyu.....! Why aren't they there....?!"

After her elaborate but fruitless attempts, Yeonji let out a noise like a kitten who received an unopened can of cat food.

And what do you mean, 'why aren't they there'? Why is it so important that you find them?

Before I could ask her if she would please stop her useless searches, she pouted and began typing in different keywords.

[Seventeen]

".....?!"

[Schoolgirl][Sexy][Young][Asian][Hardcore][Legal][Kidnapping][Stallion][Avatar][Transformers]---

The keywords appeared as rapidly as the rate the new search windows were opened.

...What the hell are Avatar and Transformers doing there, why are you even searching for them?!

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

Breaking out of my stun, I sallied forth to prevent further appearances of any dangerous keywords. My past decision to buy wireless input devices shined in that moment, as I lifted my mouse and keyboard above my head and Yeonji was easily suppressed.

"Ah, stop that, you idiot! Give it!"



Would you give it back if you were in my position?!

I ignored Yeonji as she hopped up and down to retrieve the mouse & keyboard and looked at the monitor. The last search window had some letters which terminated at 'Peni'.

...What were you going to search, the Peninsula Campaign?

"I said give it to me, you idiot, dummy, pervert!"

Clearly you're the pervert here!

I could not continue to keep the devices out of her reach as she began kicking; Yeonji realized that she could not jump high enough to get to my height. I drew her attention away with my keyboard as a bait, and snuck in a light knock on her head.

"Get a grip, Seo Yeonji."

"Ow!"

Yeonji froze on the spot as if I had pressed her power switch. She stood wide-eyed as I sighed and talked to her.

"You're not going to find anything. Let's just start that meeting now."

"Nyuu--t!"

Look at her, grumbling like that.

Seriously, why do you want to see those files so much? Search them online in your own room.

...But that was not something I would say to a girl. While Yeonji was hissing and puffing up her imaginary tail and fur, I made a sort of confession.

"If you think about it sensibly, there's no reason for me to want to show those things to a girl. I already removed them, so it's normal for you to not find anything. So you can stop now."

"What-."

Yeonji flinched at my comment.

"...Is that how it is?"

"Yeah."

I had no idea how was what, but I replied positively regardless and nodded appropriately. Yeonji stiffly looked away and twiddled her thumbs.

"Is... is that how it is? They're erased, because I'm a girl, so they're not there..."

"Uh... yeah, right."

Did you only realize now that you're a girl?

And then it dawned upon me that I had just confessed, 'Just yesterday, this computer was FULL of dirty stuff!'. I felt my face redden.

Only in hindsight I realized it was quite the nonoptimal thing I could ever say. I keep digging myself into a new hole.

"Okay... hmph, but I wanted to know what kind of things you'd look at..."

Yeonji murmured incoherently to herself while I was busy internally wrestling with the fact that the situation was no different from having all those files uncovered.

The atmosphere of the room became stark and grave thanks to my breathtaking confession. Both of us were at a loss for words.

Then Yeonji raised her peach face and yelled,

"Okay!"

Whoa, now.

"Then let's start our meeting."

With my surprise, Yeonji stole the mouse and keyboard from my hands and closed the numerous search windows. She looked strangely motivated.

I don't know what happened, but I guess I just dodged the bullet! I let out a silent sigh of relief.

Yeonji opened up a web browser and entered our school's home page.

It was a month since the start of the term, but this was the first time actually seeing the home page. As the home page of the great Eunsung High School, the website was more organized than an average commercial site, and the page view count was unbelievably high. How could there be so many visitors?

"Why are we in this page?"

"Just be quiet and watch."

She replied, navigating through the different sections of the website. She continued to talk in her visibly positive mood.

"Do you still remember that the name of today's operation is 'Club Room Takeover'?"

"I know that. I wanted to ask, does it really have to be a 'takeover'? Aren't there any other ways?"

Yeonji shot down my question with her quick answer.

"God, you're annoying. Now that we decided that our club will be illegal, it's obvious that we'll get our club room illegally. We won't ask others for help; we will

forcibly pry the help out of their hands! See, doesn't that just motivate your fighting spirit?"

It was a mystery if there was a limit to the number of rules she was willing to break... I should say, she had more fighting spirit than the Shanghai Provisional Government of Korea in the 1930s.

"But even if we acquire the club room with our own strength..."

I struggled to understand what she meant by 'our strength'. Were you going to grab a baseball bat and threaten a club advisor with it?

"Hmph, we're not going to use such a brutish and simple method. Illegally, but still under the radar, making a perfect plan that cannot go wrong is the only way to win."

Yeonji announced her villainous plan with a girlish smile.

"Huh, did you have something in mind?"

"Of course."

Still fiddling around in the website, Yeonji replied.

"We will attack the Book Club first."

"What are you saying?!"

It's neither under the radar nor planned! And also...

"Our school doesn't even have a Book Club! Where are you going to attack?"

"We have one: the one where all the upper year students graduated so there is only a lone first grader reading a book all day."

"That's not a real club-!"

She was not too keen on the differences between real life and imagination.

"If we can take that room, I am sure there will be all sorts of supernatural and fun things that happen."

"It has already been supernatural enough!"

"We will also have a mysterious transfer student, and a popular second year student with huge breasts, too."

"Please come back to real life, Miss Seo Yeonji."

"We have to make the first move before that Suzu[X]ya girl, and take over everything for ourselves. Kukuku..."

"We're totally the main villains here-!!"

By the time I was venting steam from my ears, Yeonji spoke with a thin smile.

"Well, that was a joke..."

"It was a joke?!"

It's very difficult to tell if you're kidding or not!

"My original plan was... Ah, I found it."

I looked at the part on the screen that Yeonji was pointing at. It was a browser window containing an expansive grid composed of people's profile photos.

Discernible from the address was that the page was the [Staff List] section about [About This School] category in the menu tabs. It was apparently a list of all the teachers.

It was made obvious further by the familiar faces of my teachers, and the labels that described each teacher's faculty and work history.

As expected of this school, the work history for each teacher was unbelievably lengthy, considering that they were only high school teachers.

"So how is this helping us?"

"You can see the 'home room' section below the photos, right below the specialties."

"Uh...."

I confirmed her words on my second inspection. My home room teacher, for example, had a label that said [Home room: Year 1 Class 7 (Homeroom teacher)]. Other notable ones were teachers who managed laboratories and art classes of various purposes.

"What's this?"

"It's the classes that the teachers own and manage."

Yeonji explained.

"If there is a student who wants to start a club, he needs to first get proper permission from the teacher who owns a relevant classroom. So, theoretically, people can choose the classroom that they want as their club."

It was a reasonable policy. It would be quite perplexing to receive a music theatre in response to a request for a research club room.

"The owner of the classroom has the power to accept or reject such a request. If the request is accepted by all parties, the owner has the responsibility to become the supervisor of the club--' is what it says in the rules, here."

"...So that's why it's so hard to make a club in this school."

I commented after realizing the complications that may occur, as a result of these rules interweaving.

Because the teachers have the 'power to accept or reject' club room requests, the very first filtering of requests occur all due to the teachers' whim.

In addition, acceptance is made further unattractive to the teachers as they gain additional responsibilities and duties for the club, but who would be willing to receive more work for nothing?

And so that seemed to be the biggest reason why there were only academic clubs in our school. Even disregarding Yeonji's comments, it was clearly impossible to create the Clotaku Club legally.

"Still, none of it matters to us."

Yeonji scoffed like it wasn't a problem, in contrast to my increasing agitation.

"We're not going to submit any silly requests, so we can't get rejected for anything. The only thing I need to figure out is which room would be suitable for our activities. Let's see..."

Yeonji began shifting through the list, like a perverted tyrant picking out a slave to serve for the night. She opened another browsing window to navigate to the [Index of School Clubs] for the directory of active clubs.

Then, after removing the occupied teachers from her list of potential candidates--

"Okay, this should be enough."

"....."

Subtracting the teachers who were already associated with another club (thus removing the classrooms that would never be available for us), the remaining options were not many.

The sum of active clubs was 20. Although this was a small number in comparison to the total number of classrooms in this school, the actual count of the non-homeroom classrooms was minor.

None of the 20 active clubs occupied simple classrooms; all of their locations were more unique, separate rooms, such as science laboratories and tech labs.

Ultimately, the remaining options were unpleasant leftovers; normal classrooms were out in the open for 'closeted' activities, and I did not even want to think about using the student guidance department rooms.

"Psh, those greedy bastards."

Yeonji muttered angrily with her arms crossed. I agreed with her.

It was objectionable how the unarguably socially acceptable clubs like the 'mathematics club' or the 'conversational English club' felt the need to hide in some art rooms at the corners of the school. Are there any questionable activities that are relevant to math and language that they need to hide?

"At least the fifteenth classroom of the third years is at the very edge of the school..."

"No. It's right next to the main staircase."

My final suggestion was immediately shot down.

"And using a classroom like that is annoying. We can't always have it available to us. I wonder if we can find a room that I can make it fit our needs..."

Yeonji repeatedly scrolled up and down the list of teachers. To make a room fit our needs, she said; I stifled the urge to ask her what kind of terrible modifications she had in store.

"Okay."

After much time spent in peering into the monitor, Yeonji declared with much authority in a booming voice.

"Let's aim for the principal's office."

"The principal's office?!"

What utter nonsense!

"How are we, I mean, why the principal's office in the first place?!"

"The location is amazing."

Yeonji replied without batting an eye.

"It's quiet, and it's discreet. If we manage to take over the principal's office, we can sit on that leather couch every evening and watch some anime on that 82-inch TV."

"That just sounds way too heavenly! And you talk like you've been there before!"

"I had an interview in there as standard procedure after receiving a scholarship... I pretended to be grateful while I silently calculated how I will take over the room someday. Kukuku..."

She described her diabolic scheme with a mismatching cute grin.

Mister Principal, I think you may have accidentally summoned a demon at you school.

I guess you're a scholarship student too, huh.

In the midst of my confusion caused by multiple layers of questions to ask, our next course of action seemed to be set in stone as a hostile takeover attempt for

the principal's office.

I interrupted her appropriately as she appeared ready to invade the principal's office at any moment.

"But hey, how are you going to take over the principal's office? Do you have some sort of a plan?"

To use the principal's office as a club room, more so as the Clotaku Club room, there had better be the most intricate, flawless plan ever.

Yeonji went 'ahem' in response and posed in preparation of her answer. Your Otaku meter is off the charts, here!

"Heh heh... it's simple! Take a look at this!"

Beneath Yeonji's extended finger on the monitor was the photo of our dear principal.

Further below her finger was the wall of text that further demonstrated the relation between Eunsung Corporations and this school, but nonetheless this was not too different from the profile of any average principals.

"...So what about it?"

"You can see it right away, see this, here!"

Yeonji continued relentlessly jabbing against the principal's face, who had thick spectacles pushed up by his puffy cheeks, and with wrinkles on top of his stern expression. Then she animatedly shouted,

"He totally looks like an Otaku!"

Cough.

If there were anything in my mouth, there would have been a shotgun blast in all

cardinal directions.

After I repeatedly coughed to replace the air that escaped my lungs, I recovered my breath and managed to ask a question with a stutter.

"You... you... are you really..."

"Yep. Let's blackmail the principal."

Yeonji replied as lightly as dandelion seeds in the wind. This is the face of true evil, I thought to myself.

"Tsk... Our principal was that kind of a man all along; I simply can't believe this! Yes? Oh my, don't think you can lie your way out of this; I have the evidence right here, right in here. Ah, hey, hey, it's no use doing that, I already have copies backed up elsewhere. Yes? What are our demands? Heh heh, that's right. Here, let me tell you..."

"Stop preparing threats against the principal----!!"

I sighed and stopped Yeonji with her extortion attempt against an imaginary principal.

I had no clue how I'd start convincing her to reconsider her plan.

"Um, think about it logically; the principal can't possibly be an Otaku."

"There's no reason he wouldn't be one!"

Yeonji was yet unfaltering.

"These unfashionable glasses, his fat cheeks, and even the pimples on his face! It's the Holy Trinity of loser's qualities! His face is like looking at a portrait of an Otaku, seriously!"

"...I'm pretty sure those are just chickenpox scars, not pimples."

"Chickenpox?!"

Yeonji unexpectedly revealed her honest surprise.

"Does that still exist nowadays? Wasn't it eliminated by the '70s? Chickenpox may have been the deadliest curse for kids back then, but now it's the illegal, lewd videos that are..."

"Our principal was one of those 'kids from back then'!"

I sighed once more.

"Even if he were an Otaku, how are we going to prove it? You can't even see what's going on in the principal's office from the outside."

"...Nyu-u-t."

Yeonji became mildly hesitant. I pressed on the advantage and continued.

"Also, even if we somehow get evidence, the principal would likely report us to the police and expel us rather than allow some questionable activities in the principal's office. If you consider his reputation, even if we scream 'The principal is an Otaku!', no one will believe us. Don't think this will be the same situation as mine."

"Nng-."

Yeonji pouted and whined in annoyance. She looked as if, oh, her brain was convinced, but her heart was unfazed. Something like that.

"...Tsk, alright. Then we just have to pick another teacher who's easier in comparison, right?"

"Ah, uh... yeah."

It appeared that my lecture was understood as 'Let's pick on someone smaller!'. Yeonji resumed spinning the mouse wheel up and down and muttered to herself

'Let's see who looks like an Otaku~'.

I asked,

"By the way... It occurred to me just now; why are you finding teachers who are Otakus?"

"Eh?"

Yeonji paused her scrolling and looked my way. She had a curious expression.

"I mean, if we're going to make threats to get our club room, I don't think we really need to go after Otakus. We could find other kinds of weaknesses, I think."

While I had little idea of the details behind Yeonji's plans, the gist of it seemed to be 'Find a teacher who is an Otaku, then tell him to hand over the club room or we'd reveal his secrets to everyone'. In other words, she was going to repeat what was done to me to a teacher.

However, it's not like being an Otaku is some capital crime; it was difficult to imagine that anyone, especially a teacher, would succumb to a threat like ours. As mentioned before, we could be sued back.

With Yeonji's steadfastness, she could comfortably uncover other vulnerabilities... like, uh, she could capture a photo of some teacher leaving a love hotel with a scantily dressed woman. It was hard to understand why she would pigeonhole her strategy.

"Hmph."

Hearing my plea, Yeonji grunted in dissent.

"Of course, that could be far more beneficial for us. I already examined that course of plan."

Yeonji replied as the grandmaster of blackmail. It was a little bit unsettling how

serious she was.

As I involuntarily trembled, Yeonji cleared her throat and continued.

"But, if we gain a club room and a manager that way, how will that help us?"

"....?"

Yeonji slowly spun in place in my spinning chair, her chin supported by her hand, her elbow balanced on the armrest.

"The club we are making is the Clotaku Club. Even if it's merely a club manager, it's essential that everyone is on the same page as us. I'm treating this like finding the third member."

Yeonji announced with much confidence. It was an awe-inspiring objective, but because we were pressed to find any club room and manager at all, her plan was unrealistic.

I scanned her words for a point to place a rebuttal, but Yeonji spoke first.

"And the quality of 'being an Otaku' is a strong social stigma. There are Otakus who would rather die than be found out by their peers. It only makes sense that our own club manager is a closeted Otaku."

Hey, that reasoning is slightly off from what you just said before.

"For now, let's just find a teacher who looks like an Otaku! And if we find our target, prepare to work day and night on finding evidence."

"Day and night..."

It's going to get busy--.

I made a sigh full of worries and fears, looking at the girl scrolling up and down the list of teachers like choosing a heroine to conquer in a visual novel.

"...But, if there really aren't any Otakus, I'll have to blackmail about love affairs and whatnot."

"Don't do that--!"

"There's a saying that tigers look for lobsters if they have no other prey."

"Don't plan about finding lobsters before you even start hunting--!"

...Hopefully, I won't end up on a photography tour in a red light district.

4. The Witch in White

So, after all that happened,

Several days later, we commenced our next plan, 'Operation: Find-some-way-to-blackmail-the-staff-and-obtain-a-clubroom'.

It occurred to me that Yeonji had a habit of inflating the importance of every single thing by calling it an 'operation'... but whatever, I guess.

To explain the general direction of our plan, Yeonji was to pick out the 'right' person from our staff list, then use all means necessary to prove that he or she is an Otaku. It was a stupidly inefficient plan.

The operation procedure was simple.

We were to find the target's main workplace (usually somewhere in the school office), wait until everyone leaves the area, and when the time is right, one person searches their computer while the other keeps a lookout. Done.

Once we find any Otaku material in the computer, the plan was to watch our target like a hawk from then on and eventually get video proof of their Otaku activities... but it was easier said than done.

Firstly, 'until everyone leaves the area' was a difficult condition to fulfill.

Waiting for everyone to vacate such a busy place was much like waiting for apples to ripen and fall from a tree; we resorted to sneaking around blind spots within the room to approach the target's computer.

Secondly, there were none.

After going to hell and back to investigate their computers, Yeonji's expectations were betrayed as there were no hidden folders of eroges or doujins. Rarely, we uncovered some pussycat videos(!), but they had no use for us yet.

...But to perhaps make use of it later, Yeonji did not forget to remember the owners of those videos... Anyway, our findings were nil.

In retrospect, it was unlikely that any sane teachers would blatantly behave like Otakus in a public setting, like the school offices. Wouldn't they normally keep it to themselves in their lonesome?

"Then how do you explain all the pussycat videos?!"

Yeonji grumbled in anguish. Her face showed bright red, likely because she had to sit through an adult video after a long, tiring day spent rummaging through PCs.

"Okay, that's true."

But pussycat videos are different from anime; you only need to watch it briefly to reach your goals. You naive, young girl.

--But because I must never say such a thing, I resorted to agreeing with Yeonji. It seemed like Yeonji was greatly frustrated from our fruitless exploration.

"I can't believe this! True Otakus must devote their life to acting like one. But the only things in the computer are pussycat videos; this makes no sense!"

That's because the teachers aren't true Otakus. They simply aren't Otakus at all.

I sighed and nearly sprawled on my bed.

If I haven't hinted it yet, our current location was my own room once again. After the wasted efforts throughout today, we had dragged our tired bodies in here for an emergency meeting.

Mom's reaction to Yeonji's third appearance in this house was... further description will be omitted. I really needed to do something about her before this situation got out of hand.

Unlike me, who was sprawling from physical and mental exhaustion, Yeonji

seemed to have the energy to go on. She gave me a dirty look and scrunched her nose, disappointed at my lack of will.

"This is strange... what went wrong? My perfect plan is falling apart already. That Ha[X]hi person got her club room so easily! Why not me?!"

What's the point of feeling competitive against a fictional character? And Haru[X] is a god, mind you; you can't compete with that.

"Hmph, this isn't possible. There has to be some teacher so completely depraved that he secretly plays visual novels within school! I will find that person!"

Yeonji declared like a little kid set out to find a legendary Po[X]mon. Considering our situation, a person like that indeed feel a lot like a legendary [X]kemon.

I commented,

"Even if we find an Otaku... The places we searched today were constantly packed with people. In a place where their co-workers and students are always around, not even an Otaku would do anything like that there."

Seriously, playing a visual novel within the school office is already off the limits of being a 'closeted' Otaku.

"Tsk. It's okay to watch pussycat videos, but being an Otaku isn't. I seriously don't understand this society! I don't know what to say."

Yeonji rhythmically shook her head left and right like she was really baffled. It was slightly cute.

Still, I was too embarrassed to resolve her misunderstanding with the pussycat videos.

I carefully reassured her, as she was getting sulky:

"Starting tomorrow, we should investigate the staff members that are in one of

the more secluded departments. If we can find anything useful, it's probably there, I think."

"Secluded department... the principal's office?"

"Why are you still clinging to the principal's office?!"

I know that you want to see some anime on an 82-inch television, but give up now!

"Nyu--t."

With an objection to her unending ambition, Yeonji gave up and returned her focus to the computer screen. I swear, by the end of this, she would be able to remember the names of everyone in this school.

"A secluded department... If we're talking about a secluded department... Ah, there's one."

Inspiration struck her like lightning. I arose and checked my laptop monitor.

"The infirmary."

"It's actually pretty secluded!"

I was shocked.

"Hm... it might be unexpectedly great, that infirmary."

"It's not great at all--!"

I haven't ever seen anyone trying to use an infirmary as a club room, fiction or real life.

But Yeonji spoke in her usual seriousness,

"No, this is a very nice place. Infirmarys are normally in the less populated area in schools. There are also beds to use, so that's a frosting on the cake."

"What do we do with beds in our club activities?"

"I-if we get tired, we could lie down and sleep."

A hesitant reply met with my question asked in confusion. Go sleep in your own room!

"A-anyway--!"

With her face strangely reddened, Yeonji raised her voice.

"Anyone could act like an Otaku to the fullest in a lone place like the infirmary! Now that I look at her, the nurse physically looks like an Otaku."

"Really?"

I looked at the photo where the cursor laid, but there was only a good-looking woman in her late 20s or so; nothing about her seemed Otaku-like.

"She's quite pretty..."

I read through the entry with the header that was labeled: [Yu Youngseon(27), School Nurse, Home Room: Infirmary]. I was very impressed; she graduated from medical school at such a young age, and she began her work here already.

This isn't some average high school; it's the Eunsung high school. Even as a school nurse here, it would be a great boon to her future career as a doctor. She was a total Mary Sue, with her great looks and being a young med school graduate.

She had no chance of being an Otaku.

"Hmph."

Yeonji grunted in dissent at my doubtful manner.

"Good looks my ass. Look at those black circles under her eyes, and those cloudy eyes like she's in permanent REM-sleep. Those are undoubtedly the side effects of playing visual novels late at night. I'm certain!"

Yeonji made a blatant guess.

In closer inspection, there was indeed a touch of black under the nurse's eyes in the photo, but it was unreasonable to denounce her as a visual novel addict with only that.

--But even if I said that to her, it was obvious she would hear none of it, so I kept silent.

And also,

It occurred to me that I was sitting right beside a diligent yet cute little girl, who was quite unfortunately an Otaku.

"Hmm--"

I squinted to observe her in detail.

On her glum face was a cute pout, skin so white that a poke might leave a mark, and her large, beady eyes.

I had been forgetting it due to her unpleasant attitude, but on closer inspection she was still unarguably cute. I'm sure anyone else would say the same.

I wonder how she became an Otaku.

She really doesn't look like an Otaku, visually-- and now Yeonji noticed that I was staring.

Opposing my squint, she cocked her eyes and shot a dirty look.

"What is it all of a sudden, staring at me like a creep?"

"N-no, it's nothing."

If I chose the option to say 'No, I was just thinking you were really cute~', I wonder what would have happened. Maybe it could have set off a flag!

"Hmph."

Yeonji scoffed. I looked away, my head plagued with weird imaginations.

Yeonji closed the windows on the screen with a violent flick of the mouse. She briefly had an expression on her face resembling the face of a cat that had accidentally feasted on a poisoned mouse.

She said,

"So, the infirmary has another advantage. It's easier for us to raid the room for clues, because students can freely visit it."

Of course. I nodded in agreement.

It was highly unnatural for us to frequently show up at a place like the school office, but the infirmary was officially a place for students to be. With a good excuse, we could visit and investigate the room without much difficulty.

I would no longer have to hide from the teachers, or crawl between desks on all fours. Already, that was a highly motivational prospect.

As I recovered my morale, Yeonji turned off the computer and spoke.

"Alright, then we're set. By tomorrow, I'll have the details of our plan ready. Come out to the infirmary when the lunch break starts."

"Wait, before having lunch?"

"Of course."

She explained,

"Lunchtime is the most optimal time for us; even the nurse would have to leave to eat lunch. Anyway, I don't want to waste time eating. Right away after the bell rings after the fourth class! Immediately! Don't forget that you're going directly to the infirmary. If you're late, it's posthumous execution for you."

"I'm not even dead yet..."

I objected with my face planted on the bed. It looked like, tomorrow, I won't even get to have my lunch thanks to all the payless, menial work Yeonji will force on me.

Listening to Mom say 'You're coming back tomorrow too, right?' as Yeonji prepared to leave, I silently prayed that the school nurse is an actual Otaku so that we may get a club room soon.

* * *

Lunchtime.

Normally, as soon as the end-of-the-class bell rang, I would have sprinted towards the cafeteria in a swarm of students, like a bunch of Velociraptors hunting down a Brachiosaurus. Then I would have quickly gulped down my lunch, and then I would have been forced into a territorial dispute with the other classes for the school fields.

But this day, such a normal daily routine was not permitted, as my soul is bound to a devil named Yeonji, and so I was walking towards the infirmary on an empty stomach.

So hungry. Dammit all.

Yeonji, who was the size of a pea but attached with a high-tech jet engine, may be completely fine with skipping a meal. However, over here was a growing boy in

high school. My stomach began loudly complaining after four hours of suffering in class without any food inside. Even my sighs felt light with no food weighing me down.

As I lurched towards the infirmary that was on the East side of the first floor, I imagined the kinds of scheme Yeonji could have drafted in the meantime.

"..."

Honestly, nothing came to my mind.

From our first encounter, Yeonji always seemed to be fluttering around outside of my boundaries of understanding.

Even during our face-to-face conversation, I could not at all read into what sorts of thoughts she may have been having.

Whatever the case, it was apparent that I would again toil my life away, so I gave up pondering further.

At the end of the hallway was Yeonji.

"You're late! Penalty!"

What the hell do you mean by 'penalty'?

Ignoring Yeonji's spontaneous remark, I glanced at my wrist watch.

It was barely 2 minutes since the start of our lunch break; it was stunning how quickly Yeonji arrived here. Don't run in the hallway, you.

While I threw suspicion-filled glances at Yeonji's thin legs, she stuck her head out to look into the infirmary through an open window.

"I can't really see if anyone's inside. You look too."

I wondered how I'd help if she couldn't see, but I obliged nonetheless.

Through the narrow opening of the tinted windows, I could only see various medicine bottles and common medical equipment. As she had said, it was hard to know who was inside.

"I don't know, either."

"Nyuu-ngh."

Yeonji closed her eyes and became lost in thought. I had only known her for a few days, but from my experience thus far, she never failed to come up with some preposterous plans after making that pose.

After some time tapping her elbows with her fingers while cross-armed, she reopened her eyes and commanded,

"You should go in first. Pretend that you're sick."

See.

It was a sudden request, but I had predicted something like this would happen beforehand. Anyway, it was quite a normal plan for Yeonji.

I sighed and asked,

"I'm fine pretending to be sick... but what kind of sickness do I fake? I'd rather avoid being humiliated the moment I walk in."

"Obviously, you just--."

Yeonji's eyes briefly lay on my legs.

...You weren't thinking about saying 'just break your legs a little', were you?

It was quite a believable suggestion that Yeonji would actually do it. I flinched.

Yeonji awkwardly cleared her throat and whispered,

"Well... Just come closer for a moment."

"Hey, hey, hey!!"

You're not actually going to break my legs, right?! Right?!

"Don't act like an idiot."

Yeonji gave a disappointed glance.

"How am I going to break a guy's legs without any weapons? Stop being stupid and get over here."

It sounded like she was implying that she would have done it if she had a weapon.

"Lean down."

I hesitantly walked towards her like a kid getting his punishment- and in response, Yeonji sounded like she was ready to punish me.

I leaned over to match her eye level.

She's not going to throw punches at my eyes, is she? I guess it would be easy to walk in the infirmary if I had black eyes, but Mom would freak out once I get home! The scariest part about Yeonji was that she was the type of person who would do such a thing without hesitation.

Yeonji's small face closed into me, as I nervously waited for her.

"...Close your eyes."

"Huh?"

The mood was turned upside-down.

Yeonji's strangely reddened face had come even closer.

To exaggerate slightly, it was a distance short enough for us to feel each other's breath. It was a distance that was close enough for me to see Yeonji's pink, wet lips mildly tremble in uneasiness.

In this strange situation, Yeonji demanded that I close my eyes with a shaky voice. I had no clue what had just happened there.

"Uh, you know...?"

"I said, close your eyes!"

Yeonji, with her rouge-tinted face, commanded me. Under her pressure, I closed my eyes, and felt a soft, pleasant touch on my forehead...

...Forehead?

Scrubscrubscrubscrubscrubscrubscrub----!

"H-hot-!!"

Fiery heat quickly spread on my forehead.

When my senses returned, Yeonji's small palm was in the process of causing a fire on my forehead by inducing frictional energy.

What's the meaning of this?!

Scrubscrubscrubscrubscrubscrubscrubscrubscrub-----!

"Hey, hey! It hurts, it hurts! Sto-stop it!"

How long are you gonna do this for?! It's like you're sanding off a gum off the floor!

I screamed and pushed Yeonji away. Yeonji rubbed her hands together, and like a

maestro about to perform her masterpiece, she said,

"That should be enough. Right now, you're a boy who's struck with fever and dizziness, so you feel like resting on a bed."

"Hey, come on..."

I laid my hand on my forehead, and indeed it was hot like I was running a fever. If I cracked some eggs on my forehead, I could have some fried eggs.

"What are you waiting for? That 'fake fever' buff lasts for only 5 minutes. Get in there quickly while you're visibly sick. I'll go in with you later."

I wanted to raise an issue with many things, but this girl who casted the buff(?) did not seem to pay any attention.

Yeonji disappeared after abandoning me in front of the entrance. I sighed, now alone.

This is going to last 5 minutes? More like 10 minutes!

Mustering up some courage gained after witnessing Yeonji's lips in such a close proximity, I slowly opened the infirmary door and walked in.

...She said she was going to follow me in. How was she planning on doing that?

* * *

It was my first time seeing the interior of the infirmary, ever since I began high school.

The first notable quality was that the room was humongous.

Surely other middle-high schools have tiny rooms for infirmaries. Considering only the area that was visible to me, the infirmary was at least as big as my home classroom, and there were at least eight beds in sight.

Each bed was not just a plain old bed seen commonly in an infirmary; they were modernized hospital beds that had the equipment to keep patients alive, if need be.

Again, this school is seriously loaded.

If Yeonji saw this, she would probably be bent on acquiring this place. With that thought, I stumbled deeper into the room.

"Uh... is anyone here...?"

Perhaps it was because of the guilt from faking my sickness; I sounded genuinely like a patient suffering from a fever. In the midst of my search for the nurse in this needlessly expansive room, I discovered something strange.

"What is this?"

Sitting between the entrance and the beds was a desk. There was a bulletin board resting on its surface, so I closed in to inspect it.

Let's see, these things on top of the desk are... Are these medicines? And this sign, which was obviously constructed from the last year's calendar, says...

[Self-service for light symptoms]

Headache - White bottle (A), 1 dose 1 spoon

Fever - White bottle (B), 1 dose 1 spoon

Cold - White bottle (C), 1 dose 1 spoon + Cold syrup 1 dose 50mm

Stomachache, diarrhea - Red bottle, 1 dose 1 spoon

Period - Blue bottle, 1 dose 2 spoons

Bruises, cuts - Orange ointment, appropriate amount + band-aid

Serious problems such as broken bones, concussion are to be reported to the nurse next door ->

P.S. Those who want to rest on the beds must get a note from your teacher before asking me.

Yu Youngseon, Nurse

"..."

I don't know about her being an Otaku, but she's not even hiding how lazy she is!

Awestruck at the sight of the infirmary's self-aid-service(?), I turned to look in the direction to which the arrow pointed, and discovered another door on the wall.

I haven't ever seen an infirmary that was this huge. I guess I should go in.

After taking deep, slow breaths, I slowly approached and knocked on the door.

'Mmh, could you wait a moment~?'

I was expecting the answer to be 'Come in~'. I stood there in silence, as if my question of '¿Cómo estás?' had failed to meet with '¿Bien, gracias, y tu?'.

Whatever she was doing, it took a very long time before the door opened.

"Sorry, I'm a little bit busy... So, where are you hurting?"

The nurse left her room, positioning herself on exit so that the inside of the room was not visible as she moved out.

Including the sleepy eyes, she was a beautiful lady as seen from yesterday's photo.

She was pretty tall for a lady, only slightly shorter than I was. Her long hair was tied behind her head in a ponytail, and she had a white gown on that seemed to be slightly unfitting for her size.

...Most notably, she had big breasts. Even with the large gown, they were amazingly visible.

"...I wonder where he's hurt."

When I did not answer her, a small frown surfaced on her relaxed face. I returned to my senses, alerted by her words.

"Oh, my head is suddenly pounding, and I have a fever..."

"Hmm."

The nurse inspected me with her eyes. I did my best to look like I was in pain. The nurse spoke,

"Well, I can check your temperature... can you stay still for a moment?"

"Huh?"

Before I formulated a proper response, the nurse's right hand covered my forehead. When her beautiful hand approached me, with well kempt fingernails and pleasant fragrance, my breath was taken away.

"Ah--- hm, hm."

The nurse laid her left hand on her own forehead, her right hand on mine, and nodded with her eyes closed.

The way she calmly checked my body temperature seemed to make my heart beat dangerously fast.

"...38.2 degrees Celsius, maybe. It's pretty high."

After the nurse removed her hand and stepped back, my face was again reddened.

It would not be so strange if that just raised my temperature by an extra 0.5 degrees. Anyway, you just used your hands, and you can measure temperature down to the first decimal digit?!

The nurse went 'Hmm~' and stared at me, as I was bumbling in place. Then she spoke in a mildly annoyed tone.

"After you take that medicine over there... rest on the bed for a bit and go back to class. Hey, did you get a note from your teacher?"

"N... no."

My symptoms only surfaced just as I arrived at the infirmary; there was no way I'd have a teacher's note. As I was stammering in embarrassment, the nurse scratched her neck and waved her hand around and said,

"I'm not supposed to do this... I guess I have no choice. You can stay until the end of lunch time. If you want to rest longer, then you have to come back with the teacher's note. ...Understand?"

"Ah, I understand."

Rather than sympathy, it seemed to be laziness that had convinced her. Sleepily blinking with her eyes that are laden with dark circles, she finished talking and returned to her room. I momentarily remained rooted in place.

I wondered what all this meant.

Yeonji was right in thinking that this she was suspicious, but it was hard to tell if it had anything to do with her being an Otaku.

I tried to imagine what exactly she was doing in her room. I glared at the closed door, but without having some X-ray vision, it was a fruitless effort. I found it likely that there was some value in investigating that room.

It felt awkward leaving at this point, so I was on standby until Yeonji followed me in. I swallowed the pill that the nurse had given me and rested on the bed.

...Then the realization came that I probably didn't have to take that pill, but it was too late.

Well, I was sure Yeonji would have given me more headaches in the future, so let's just call it a precautionary measure.

Sometime later,

After having struggled against sleepiness as I lay down on a bed, hidden behind white curtains, someone entered the infirmary with the sound of the front door opening.

From the pitter-patter of a cat that I heard, it was most likely Yeonji. The footsteps neared my location and paused, presumably startled by that desk from before.

"Hmph."

Yeonji's onomatopoeia pierced through the curtains to reach me. Please quiet down indoors.

She seemed dumbfounded by the 'self-aid service' on that bulletin board.

Just like I had done, Yeonji must have discovered the other door that was pointed out by an arrow sign; her footsteps moved to that direction.

Tap-tap - and the knocks echoed. There came voices from the door's direction, words muddled by the curtain's filtering.

I had no way to know for sure, but I had a feeling that the words again were 'could you wait a moment~?' mostly because it took some time before the door was opened.

Soon came the quiet chatting between the nurse and Yeonji. I still could not decipher their words, but I could assume it was the same deal as before.

I wonder what sort of faked-illness-buff she applied on herself before coming here.

As I thought to myself, I heard the door close. Then the footsteps came near, and Yeonji violently pushed the curtains aside.

"What do you think you're doing, you idiot!"

"Wha- Argh!"

Yeonji performed the Flying Body Attack and crushed me under her small body. She wasn't heavy enough to weigh me down, but she managed to knock all the air out of my lungs.

"What are you doing, sleeping in this place like an idiot?! We're at an important stage that might decide our club room's fate!"

I wasn't sleeping! I was perfectly awake up until now!

No words left my mouth, since I could hardly breathe. Instead, I hurriedly signaled towards the door to alert Yeonji, who was now sitting on top of me. She pouted and responded,

"If you mean that woman, she went back into her room. I doubt she can hear us."

Look at her, calling a member of the school 'that woman'. Yeonji was already seeing the nurse as an enemy to oppose and fight.

After my lungs resumed its work, Yeonji slid off from my body and hopped down on an adjacent bed.

"Something smells fishy!"

Yeonji exclaimed like a detective who found a clue. I pulled myself up from the bed as I coughed.

"Yes, if you mean that room."

I agreed with her, since that had been my initial suspicion. Yeonji turned to the door beyond the curtains, glared with a hint of hate, and nodded.

"Yes, this is undoubtedly an Otaku vibe. A rich, fermented Otaku vibe, at that... As I thought, this infirmary is a Clotaku's hidden den."

Yeonji's pitch-black irises scoured left and right. A huge, evil grin emerged on her face.

"Anyway, yeah, this place, it's a lot better than I originally thought. For a single person to use this room, it's unforgivable. I won't accept it. This kind of awesome room should be shared with all the poor people out there."

"I guess we can use it, then."

My mocking comment was perfectly ignored.

"There's an air conditioner, and a heating system. Awesome, awesome. I especially like how there are eight beds."

Yeonji repeatedly nodded while looking around, like a customer being dazzled by a real estate salesman. I could see from her glittering eyes and peach cheeks that she was very impressed by this place. But seriously, what's so important about the beds?!

It was too early for her to act like she owned this room, but it was hard to control Yeonji while she was confident. I asked a question in an attempt to divert her confidence:

"So, what excuse did you have for coming to the infirmary? Did you rub your own forehead?"

"There's no way I'd do something as stupid as that."

You did it to me, you jerk.

Yeonji pompously giggled and answered proudly,

"I said that I was having my period, and that the pain was killing me."

"...Is that so."

Such an inappropriate remark did not fit her cute face.

"That's right. I put on some makeup in the washroom to look pale, too. When I

recalled back to the time when I had appendicitis to simulate my pain, she easily believed me. Nya-ha-ha."

I didn't understand a bulk of her words, but strangely I got progressively more embarrassed.

"Well, however it went... That room is really suspicious, so what are we going to do about it?"

"Ah, that's right."

Elevated by the success of her masterful strategy(!), Yeonji remained on the embarrassing subject until I had to change the topic. She regained her focus, and after a moment of thinking,

"Should we break down that door and barge in with a camera?"

"It's not going to happen!"

Maybe in fiction, doors break down with a couple of shoulder bashes, but not in real life. And what are we gonna do if there's nothing in the room after breaking in?

"I-I know that, at least! That was a joke!"

"I still can't tell when you're kidding or not..."

I sighed. Yeonji made an expression like a cat that had been pulled by its whiskers while sleeping, then said,

"For sure, we are going to have to go in that room and investigate."

"That's true."

"To do that, we will have to pull that woman out of that room somehow."

"Stop saying 'that woman, that woman'. She's still a teacher."

"Nyu-u-t."

I only commented out of basic manners, but Yeonji was hissing with her teeth clenched. What are you, a rattlesnake?

"A-anyway! Now there are two routes. We should wait for that woman... hmph, wait for her to exit on her own, or one of us lures her outside."

"...Let's just wait for her."

It was obvious that 'one of us' was going to end up being me. I saw my impending doom and attempted to change its course, but Yeonji's demoralizing response came.

"How long do we wait? We only have 15 minutes left in our break. How long do we wait for a woman who doesn't go out for lunch?"

"Wouldn't she at least go to the washroom?"

"She won't go with us being here."

Yeonji pouted.

Then we just have to wait every day-- was going to be my suggestion, but that could not work. Unless the nurse is an idiot, she would think it strange that there are people visiting the infirmary on a daily basis.

But that meant we had to see an end to this within today. I asked Yeonji,

"If we lure her outside, how long do we have to stall? Looking through a computer would take a long time."

"I don't need much time. One minute, no, thirty seconds? I need at least thirty seconds."

"That fast?"

"It's 'cause I have this."

Yeonji proudly stuck out her small chest and showed me a... camcorder.

It was small and handy enough to fit right in Yeonji's small, childlike hands, and it looked like it could have cost a fortune to buy.

Where were you hiding this sort of thing?!

"Hehehe... This has a built-in timer, and a special accessory for sticking the camcorder on any surface. While that woman's gone, I can attach this in the room at the perfect location, then come back tomorrow sometime to get it back. It'll only leave a glue mark."

It seemed like the camcorder was designed for nefarious purposes from the start. As Yeonji proudly caressed the camcorder, I asked once more,

"So what are you going to do about luring her out? Do you have a plan?"

"Nyuun-- About that..."

Yeonji entered her strategizing meditation.

I may have developed a habit of not thinking on my own and asking Yeonji to come up with everything, but that didn't matter at this point, because-

"You should knock on that door and say, 'Help, my lower part of my body suddenly became swollen and it won't shrink back~ Am I going to die now? Please save me~'. After that woman leaves to call the police, we can install the camcorder."

...-Because, for an everyday, normal mindset much like my own, there was no way I could come up with such insanity.

"You should do that kind of crap!"

"Impossible! I'm a girl."

Were you going to do it if you were a guy?!

Even as she was blackmailing me, there were still things that I would and wouldn't do. I glared at her, full of contempt and resolution.

She seemed to be taken down a notch.

"Okay, we don't have to go that far... Maybe you should ask her out on a walk in the park, saying that the weather is pretty nice. Or, ask her out for a coffee-milk date."

"I'm not saying that!"

In this day and age, not even preschoolers would be convinced. Yeonji's severely outdated social mannerism had left me at a loss for words.

She had a strange expression on her face, and I could not tell if she found it amusing or sad that I declined.

"...Ngh, fine. Then I'll lure her out, so you go in that room and install the camcorder."

"Huh?"

I expected that I would be the one to lure her out, so it was a surprise that she had volunteered for the job.

As I gave a surprised look, Yeonji had a heavy, dark atmosphere around her, perhaps from her mood. She said dejectedly,

"I have a failsafe plan that will 100% succeed if I use it... Well, I would prefer to not use it, but I have no choice."

"Is-is that so..."

I strangely felt sorry for her. Though, honestly, I was not confident that I could lure

the nurse out on my own, so I decided to take the plan with the 100% chance of success.

...It was most certainly not because I was afraid of getting ridiculed.

Yeonji instructed me on the methods of attaching the camcorder, and various targets to cover. As Yeonji had said, the camcorder came with a timer feature (the recording starts after 30 minutes) so there was no need to do anything with the camcorder itself.

It was a relief for me, since I could almost be considered a technophobe.

"Alright, then I'll go out and lure that woman outside. When I cough, you must immediately enter that room and install the camcorder. Don't take too long."

"Okay."

Yeonji's hands were slightly wet when she handed over the camcorder. She was nervous, too.

"Then... I'll be right back."

"Okay... be safe."

Yeonji bit her lips and headed towards the nurse's room. I held the camcorder in one hand with a heavy feeling of responsibility.

...Thinking back to it, for a criminal duo about to cause a ruckus, that was quite a romantic exchange.

Sometime after Yeonji left, I heard indistinct voices between Yeonji and the nurse. They were followed by sounds of the infirmary doors opening and closing.

Then, a highly unnatural cough resounded. It was Yeonji's signal.

Yeonji had successfully lured the nurse outside, however she did it. Already

prepared to jump out, I hastily bolted out from behind the curtains. I dashed into the open room.

A glance into the room showed nothing out of the ordinary, betraying our expectation that something major was to be found inside. There was a bookshelf against a wall, full of medical books and documents. Few couches crowded around a short coffee table in the center.

There was nothing that was special or extraordinary in this room, disregarding maybe the mini-fridge in the corner. Nonetheless, something caught my attention.

It was a computer.

Attached to an 18-inch-or-so monitor, there was a perfectly ordinary desktop computer sitting on a desk with its screen facing away to the back wall.

I checked the monitor; the computer was logged out. I needed the password to investigate further.

...So, she had something to hide, after all.

And thus, my priority target for surveillance became this computer. I quickly spied the surrounding area.

To get a nice view of the monitor... there's... nowhere to put the camcorder!

The desk was too close to a nearby wall so that only a single chair could fit in between. There was no optimal location to place my device. I momentarily panicked.

Quickly, I pulled out a chair out from under the desk, and then I stood on it with my shoes off. I was racing against time, so I chose the immediately available option; I chose a place on the very top of the bookshelf, to the left of the computer. Fortunately, there were many cardboard boxes for electronics resting on the shelves, so I placed the camcorder in one of the inconspicuous crevices in between.

The camcorder was only getting an elevated view of the monitor at an angle from above. However, I could not be too choosy, considering my situation at the time. I quickly pushed the chair back in and jumped back in my shoes to leave.

... I felt like I was playing out a situation from some H-game that I played a while back. It was quite a confusing experience.

Same day, after school,

After the completion of the first stage of 'Operation: Capture the Infirmary', we retreated back to our temporary outpost (my room) to discuss our next move.

...I completely gave up trying to stop Mom. I hoped to at least get some good information from the camcorder that I had installed.

Yeonji's fourth appearance at my house had left me as serious as Yeonji about acquiring the clubroom, so we finally had a serious, joke-free meeting... but sadly, there was nothing to discuss.

Well, really, after I installed that camcorder, any more work was only going to be more trouble. Without taking a trip to the infirmary tomorrow to retrieve that camcorder for our findings, there was nothing to talk about. The only thing we could maybe talk about was what we would do if there was nothing caught on the camera.

Yeonji, who already proclaimed the title of Clotaku Club President for herself, commented on the subject,

"Hmm? It'll be fine, probably. Tomorrow, we'll see everything that we need on film, for sure."

I wish I knew where she was getting all this courage. I swear she has endorphins flowing in her body instead of blood.

"Heh... Otakus know Otakus. The moment I saw her face, I knew that this girl was

an irredeemable Otaku. I couldn't miss that opportunity."

Said Yeonji, as the eminent leader of the Otaku social order. As an aside, I did not suspect the nurse to be an Otaku at all when I saw her. I'm an Otaku, too!

It was only wasted effort to have a meeting between an unabashedly optimistic person and an unashamedly pessimistic person. As loathsome as it would be to crush the hopes of a person anticipating fortunes from a single lottery ticket, I left Yeonji in her own happy dreams.

... And, if this was all she planned on doing, why did she even come over to my house? I grumbled under my breath at Yeonji, who was now excited like a little brat before Christmas.

"By the way, this afternoon, how did you lure the nurse outside?"

"...You really want to hear it?"

"...No, I don't, sorry."

Looks like we all made sacrifices on that day.

* * *

At the second day of Operation: Capture the Infirmary,

Yeonji and I were waiting outside the infirmary like vultures waiting for fresh road kill. Again, it was our precious lunchtime; Yeonji's patience was as thin as the atmosphere of Mars, so it was no surprise that she wanted to see the contents of the camcorder as early as possible. As if trying to prove my thought correct, Yeonji's face shone brightly like the face of a farmer seeing his yearly harvest.

...Why aren't you starving?!

For two days straight, I had faced the travesty of having to miss the opportunity to

have my lunch, but Yeonji was unfaltering. I protested that we should return after school, no, after at least having something to eat, but Yeonji looked at me like I was her bratty little brother (freakin' annoying) and said,

"Hmph, and you call yourself a man. Sometime before, I fasted for two whole days and I was fine. I realized then that the saying, 'necessity has no law' is a complete lie."

"...I bet you were just playing visual novels instead."

Personally, I believe that the government should send people like her away on an exchange program to Somalia or someplace.

While I vented my frustrations through imagining vengeance against Yeonji, she quietly spied inside the infirmary. Then she remarked in a focused tone,

"The atmosphere is the same from yesterday. That woman, she must be hiding in that same room. Then, let's go in! I'll go in first this time."

"Wait, you're really going in first?"

Yeonji nodded,

"If we go in the same order as before, she might get suspicious. At least I can make excuses about how it still hasn't ended for me."

What hasn't ended, exactly?

I did not believe that the matter was the order we went in, since we were already incredibly suspicious for having been here only yesterday.

I was filled with doubts and worries, and yet Yeonji seemed completely relaxed like nothing could go wrong. Like an army general leading her troops from the forefront, Yeonji raised her fist and shouted,

"Alright, let's go get our camcorder back! The mission is like yesterday; we group

up at the beds behind the curtains, and I plan out a perfect lure. Then, we get back the camcorder and use the contents to discuss, I mean, threaten... Ni-hee-hee~!"

Why did it have to go from 'discuss' to 'threaten'? It was also quite saddening, seeing her get overly gleeful about it.

I thought about how I would calm Yeonji down if there were nothing on the camcorder, and saw Yeonji off.

Wait, hold on.

I asked a question that had suddenly popped into my head, just as Yeonji turned around to leave.

"Hey, if you're going in first, what kind of excuse do I make up for going in with you?"

"Use the trick from yesterday, you idiot. You can rub your own forehead or something."

... I'm pretty sure she said 'there's no way I'd do something as stupid as that' before, and there she was, telling me to do just that.

Moments later,

After waiting for an appropriate length of time, I opened the infirmary door and took a step inside.

Of course, the 'necessary duration' refers to the length of time required for my forehead to receive enough heat energy from frictional work. Rubbing my own forehead in a middle of a hallway was, subjectively and probably objectively, pretty damn stupid-looking. If anyone saw me, I could be blackmailed for a new reason.

Hoping that I would never encounter the words 'I know what you did last infirmary

visit', I went further inside the infirmary for the second time.

Needless to say, nothing had changed inside, like the strong smell of the medicines unique to an infirmary, or the stupidly prominent 'self-aid-service' desk, or the needlessly abundant beds.

Surely nothing had changed since yesterday.

But what was this feeling that something wasn't right?

I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but there had to be some sort of a problem. Nevertheless, I knocked on the door to the back room as planned and called the nurse. It could have been problematic if my buff duration ran out while hesitating.

"Yes, yes-."

When I knocked, a sleepy voice called out from within, like a koala that stuffed itself with eucalyptus leaves.

If she taught language in this school instead of being a nurse, she could very easily make an entire class fall into slumbers with only her voice.

The door opened.

"Okay, what kind of sickne-... Oh, my, it's you again~..."

The nurse again covered the view inside her room upon exit. She formed a curious expression on her face.

Okay, my description of 'curious expression' was only based off of the nurse raising her eyebrows very slightly, but anyway.

"Yeah, I'm still sick from yesterday..."

I quickly answered, as I noticed a feeling of suspicion was mixed into her glare. Honestly, if I really had headaches and high fever for two days straight, I'd just take

a trip to a proper hospital.

"...That's a big problem. Do you have any other symptoms?"

The nurse asked with one hand supporting her chin.

"Uhh, umm... No, not really."

When I said I had a fever yesterday, she used her hand to take my temperature. Then, I wonder what she'd do if I were sick anywhere else?!

-The thought made me briefly squirm, but I managed to form an answer in good time. I feared that Yeonji might have an amazing auditory sense, so that she could catch everything wrong that I may say.

"Hmm... Is that so."

Drawing small circles with her finger on her gently curved chin, the nurse added,

"I guess a simple treatment wouldn't work... Wanna get an injection on your butt?"

"Whaa-t?!"

What are you saying?!

I was in utter shock. The nurse narrowed her eyes and gently laughed.

"...I'm kidding. I'm actually not that good with syringes. Here, take these pills and lie down for a bit. It should be more effective than the ones from yesterday."

The nurse took out a bottle of medicine from one of her many pockets, and gave me two pills.

"Uh..."

"Here, water."

And in another pocket, a small water bottle came out. That gown was surprisingly well-equipped.

"...Thank you."

The nurse fixed a gaze at me after handing over the water bottle, instead of going back inside the room. I had to swallow the pills.

Thanks to Yeonji, I got to take so many drugs that I never needed to.

"Good. Now, go over to that bed and lie down."

The nurse smiled brightly as I awkwardly handed the water bottle back. It was a mature smile unlike Yeonji's, I'd say; it was pretty nice to look at.

The nurse retreated to her room after I returned both bottles to her. I rushed over to the beds where Yeonji had planned to be.

"ZZZ....."

There lay a girl, short in stature, with jet-black hair.

From my memory, this was the same girl who yelled at me just yesterday, 'What are you doing, sleeping in this place like an idiot?!'

"Hey, hey, come on, Seo Yeonji, hey, get up!"

"Nyuun-n..."

Yeonji nodded off like a chick vigorously pecking at seeds. I lightly tapped on her cheeks, but her only replies were sleepy groans. I felt helpless for a moment.

After much consideration, I pinched her baby-smooth cheek.

"Oow! ...?"

Yeonji jumped up in surprise and opened her eyes.

She woke up, but her eyes were unfocused, unaware of her surroundings.

"...Slurp."

With a blank, sheepish face, she sucked a long drool back inside her mouth. Oh god.

No matter how cute she is, disgusting things remained disgusting.

While I discovered my new appreciation for the clear boundary between reality and imagination, Yeonji began waking up. She wiped her mouth with her sleeves and asked in a weak voice,

"Nyuun-... S-so sleepy.... What time is it?"

This isn't a sleepover!

Yeonji groaned like she was suffering from a massive hangover. I looked at my wristwatch and answered her (20 minutes before the end of lunch). Yeonji wallowed around, saying 'Ngh, I have no time for this...'

"What's wrong, are you really sick?"

"I don't know... My head hurts like it's going to crack open. I got enough sleep, so why am I so sleepy...?"

"Hey..."

I couldn't understand how she became as frail as an old lady, when she was just fine earlier. On the one hand, I was dumbfounded, but on the other, I was worried;

I supported her body up as she slumped back down into slumber.

"Seriously, what's wrong with you? Did you eat some spoiled food?"

"Nyu... No... I haven't eaten anything yet. Other than taking those pills from that woman..."

"Pills?"

Maybe that was it. Of course, considering that her sickness wasn't real, it was very possible that she was suffering from the drug's side effects.

"She gave me some weird-looking, yellow pills to take, two of them... I didn't need them, but I thought she'd get suspicious, so I took them... Nii-hee-hee! I told her I'm afraid of swallowing pills, so she ground them into a fiine powdeeeeerrr..."

Yeonji drawled as if she were demonstrating the Doppler effect, and then her head collided against my chest.

"Wha- hey!"

I quickly pulled her back up, but she was asleep already. She looked like she wouldn't wake up even if aliens abducted her away.

"What the hell, seriously."

I looked down at Yeonji, who was sleeping with her body resting against my chest. Then it occurred to me,

--'She gave me some weird-looking, yellow pills to take, two of them...'

Yeonji's last words. Two strange, yellow pills.

Oh, crap, son of a-

The moment I got the feeling that her description of the pills matched mine, my

consciousness was severed, and I fell into a deep sleep beside Yeonji.

* * *

My head was pounding.

It must have been karma working as usual, where some people have no care for others who suffer from an illness, only to end up suffering from the same illness later and realize 'well, I guess this illness is serious business~'.

Although, I really think that the cause and the effect were way too close together this time.

In accordance to Yeonji's comment, my head felt like it was exploding. It felt like some invisible, ghostly hands were reaching into my head to punch my brain around.

--Disregarding the fact that the brain itself feels no pain.

If I could have this kind of nonsensical discussion with myself, it meant that my consciousness must have mostly returned. I blinked and felt my eyes water up.

The fluorescent light on the ceiling was extremely bright.

"Ugh..."

I tried to lift my hands to wipe my eyes, but my hands did not budge.

"What the?"

In confusion, I tried to lift my head to see what was going on, but that was equally futile. It felt like I had lost control of my entire body; pretty soon I found out that the only working parts of my body were my eyes and my tongue.

Oh... crap.

Headache struck again, unforgivable and unforgettable as the noise of a flying mosquito on a summer night. I did what I could to spot my surroundings.

Hmm, okay. Some time ago, I entered this infirmary after Yeonji and took some weird drugs. Then, I panicked when Yeonji fell asleep, and then I ended up falling asleep too.

...It was such a cliché progression. I could see how we ended up here.

"Hey, Seo Yeonji, are you there?"

I asked, still facing the ceiling. I felt the voice linger in my head instead of escaping my mouth, but it must have been heard by Yeonji nonetheless; she replied from somewhere to the side.

"Yes, I'm here! Are you finally awake? You idiot!"

Thanks for mocking me as soon I'm awake, you jerk.

Yeonji's thin voice was subtly shaky. Of course she'd be scared. I was shaken up from this turmoil, so a little girl like Yeonji must be stricken with fear.

It was up to me to remain calm. I cleared my throat and asked,

"Well, okay... Are you at least feeling well?"

"Feeling well?! I can't even move and the light is too freaking bright! If I get ahold of that woman I'll get my revenge I'll kill her kill kill KILL!"

...It wasn't fear that she was shaking from; it was rage.

Yeonji spouted her death threats in her girlish voice. I kept my mouth shut, intimidated, and then a lazy voice drifted to my ears.

"Oh my... Both of you, you're awake already? I guess you guys are still pretty young; I thought it would take longer."

"....Nyuu-t!"

The voice belonged to the nurse. Yeonji began hissing like some bipedal unmanned anti-personnel war machine that detected an enemy life sign. Before Yeonji was enraged further, I quickly interjected.

"Excuse me! What's going on here?"

A relaxed giggle echoed in the room.

" 'What's going on'? ...That's a vague question. You guys took my drugs and fell asleep, and you are both quietly resting on separate beds. Also, I'm between standing between you two, keeping watch. It's also one-twenty right now, but I convinced your homeroom teachers to let you stay, so don't worry. Be thankful!"

The explanation was needlessly lengthy, and completely unhelpful in our situation.

Reaching the limit to her patience, Yeonji exploded in a raging fit.

"You sneaky, old fart! I knew you did something to the drugs!"

"Old fart... that's harsh. That hurts my feelings, you know."

Yeonji went 'ow, oww' from beside. She seemed to be getting her cheeks pinched like before. It wasn't all too pleasant to hear, so I interjected once more.

"What did you give to us? Were they sleeping pills?"

"Hmm... Don't know if I can call them that. I added in some pancuronium bromide, with maybe some thiopentone sodium mixed in."

Muscle relaxants and general anesthetics, if I recall.

"Wait, what? Aren't they used in lethal injections in the United States?"

Yeonji squirmed. Ignorance is bliss, sometimes.

"Yes, you're correct."

The nurse spoke in a mocking tone, maintaining her relaxed voice.

"Well, I diluted them to a safer concentration myself, so it won't be too harmful to your body. Hmm... it'll keep you conscious, but your entire body will be numb, for a bit. So, relax."

That's not relaxing at all!

Yet, Yeonji was relaxed already, as she resumed her angry shouts.

"Nyu-u-t! Why would you give that kind of drug to us?"

"Hmm... No, even if you ask that way,"

The nurse spoke, upset,

"You two left this thing in my room. I thought I shouldn't let it slide, after seeing this.

"?!"

I didn't need to turn my head to know that Yeonji flinched. From her reaction, I could assume what the nurse was showing her.

The camcorder had been found.

As I had expected, a familiar, small camcorder entered my vision. A white, smooth hand played around with the device.

"...I'm guessing you were the one who put that there, you big liar. I wonder what you were trying to film with this."

"Ugh..."

I was too embarrassed to answer.

Feeling my face redden, I closed my eyes. The nurse put the camcorder away and continued,

"From the start, I thought something was strange... There were two children coming to the infirmary at the same time, while they both were obviously faking their sickness."

She was far more competent than I had believed. As I grieved for my wasted efforts thus far, the nurse's voice went on.

"So I kept watch, and this girl was trying to lure me out of my room. She made some silly lies, but I pretended to fall for them and left the room. Then this device appeared in my room when I came back!"

"S-silly lies-?!"

Yeonji exclaimed in shock.

"I can't believe it! That had to be the most perfect lure yesterday! Even Zhuge Liang's got nothing on it, and you saw through it?!"

"Hmm... Yeah, about that."

In a clearly embarrassed tone, the nurse explained,

"There's a boy with us, so I won't explain it directly... That lie, it was a bit too obvious, I should say. I got embarrassed by proxy when I heard it, I should say. Please don't ever do that again, as a lady."

"Nyuaaaaaaah--?!"

And Yeonji received a moral lesson from a person who subdued two students by drugging them. What the hell did she do?!

"Now..."

Ignoring Yeonji's volcanic eruption of a scream, the nurse turned her attention to me. Her face was still relaxed and lazy-looking, but now it held a certain power to it. Emanating an irresistible beam of light from her half-open eyes, the nurse asked,

"Why did you guys do this? Won't you explain it to the dear nurse?"

I can't take this anymore.

* * *

In our state of complete paralysis, we had no choice but to confess our criminal motive(!) to the nurse.

Now I understood what it would be like to be in the shoes of those captured leaders in grand strategy games, I thought, as Yeonji and I were interrogated by the nurse.

From the fact that we are Otakus, that we wanted to form an Otaku club, that we had to go through drastic methods since normal ways wouldn't work, and that we ended up targetting the infirmary, we revealed it all.

I never wanted to confess that we are Otakus, but Yeonji was shrieking every time I hesitated to answer (I wonder what was being done to her) so I had no other options.

The nurse reacted as expected when we confessed that we would threaten her with a video proof of her being an Otaku.

"...Hmm- well, I don't know. I usually don't say things like these... I really don't know what to say, no."

"...Sorry."

I apologized. At this point, there was really nothing else I could do.

"I understand how much you want a club, but did you really have to blackmail others for it? There are things in the world that you should never do."

"...I have no excuses."

Every word from the nurse rang true. But Yeonji did not give up yet; every time I agreed with the nurse, she began whining, but she was suppressed immediately.

I implored earnestly,

"We won't ever do something like this again. Please forgive us just this time!"

"Hmm, what should I do..."

The nurse hesitated. I coughed loudly to pressure Yeonji into begging with me, but Yeonji only answered with a 'hmpf' each time.

Just as the infirmary filled up with our disturbing sound effects, the nurse asked with a hint of dissatisfaction,

"Before that, I want to ask something..."

"Sure! Ask away!"

I became desperate. If our actions this day were notified to the school or to our parents, it was going to be a one-way trip to hell. And so I struggled to extend my life span, while Yeonji only grumbled. The nurse was silent, hesitating, and soon asked,

"So... you guys, how did you find out that I'm an Otaku?"

...

...

...

""Huh?""

We exclaimed in unison. With no regard for what I assume to be utter shock expressed on our faces, the nurse continued,

"I really don't know. I always thought I covered my tracks well; I wonder what exactly I overlooked. Hmm... This is really problematic."

The sound of her slippers dragging across the floor echoed. She was nervously pacing around the room.

I asked,

"Uh, um... So you are an Otaku...?"

"Yep, that's right."

It was a cool reply.

"I was an Otaku since middle school... Even during my S.A.T, even during the graduation exam, there was never a moment when I took a break from doing Otaku things."

Amazing.

"Th-then, what you were doing in that room was..."

"What do you think?"

Her words carried a proud feeling somewhere.

"The last few years, I focused on playing H-games. Right now, if you just enter the password for that computer, there will be a scene with a girl your age, moaning indecently. Fufufu..."

"Pervert-----!"

Yeonji cried like a baby archaeopteryx breaking out of an egg.

"Pervert! Pervert! Pervert! You perverted nurse! So you finally revealed your real nature! Repent for your sins in doing such things in this holy school! You lustfulpervertedlecherousbigbreasted woman!"

Said the girl, who tried to make a club for Otakus in this holy school. Also, that thing she said, the fourth one isn't even an insult!

"Really... You have a cute face, but your words aren't cute at all."

The nurse talked like she was sighing at the same time.

"Even if I play H-games, I don't enjoy them like other Otakus seem to do, so please refrain from saying things like 'pervert' or 'lustful'."

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

Yeonji asked. I had no clue, either. The nurse answered calmly,

"Hmm, yes, when other Otakus play visual novels, they project themselves onto the protagonist, so they themselves feel like they were the ones dating the girls and such, right?"

"...Well, sure."

I agreed in spite of Yeonji's continued snarls. The nurse let out a brief laugh and continued,

"But in my case... how should I say this? Maybe, I play it like I am a third-party observer to the story. As if I'm right beside the protagonist, watching over his actions, but unseen by the heroines... like a fairy, I guess."

"What kind of role is that--?!"

Why would you read first-person narratives if you want to do that?!

"I don't know... I am a woman, and I'm also not a high school student, so I can't see myself as being either the protagonist or the heroines. So I watch over their relationship building from a third-person standpoint! Phew, really, such a juvenile love between boys and girls... It makes me feel young myself."

"That's almost understandable, but there's something incredibly wrong about it!"

"The choices that come up in visual novels are like my advice to the protagonist."

"I didn't think the choices could be seen that way! But it still feels a bit off!"

"Teenage pregnancy is a major problem, so I always choose 'do it outside' in the H-scenes."

"Oh, what kind of nurse advises an ineffective prevention method like that?!"

"It's still safer than doing it inside."

The nurse answered, completely relaxed. Yeonji was also calming down in light of recent discoveries.

"This isn't even funny... I never expected that she would be this into it."

A moment after grumbling, Yeonji gasped in surprise and said,

"Wait; that means this woman was an Otaku like I thought!"

"...Can you not call me 'this woman'?"

Yeonji squealed like a kitten stuck in a crevice behind a couch. She recovered only a second later, speaking in a reinvigorated voice,

"Hmph! Don't get too cocky! You're already- Ow! Nyuu... We know that you're an Otaku! Hand over the infirmary! My words are backed with severe consequences!"

"Hmm... I wonder why you think I'd listen to you."

"Heh heh, it looks like you don't know what kind of situation you're in!"

Said the girl who was completely paralyzed on a bed, defenseless.

"Woman, you- Ow! - You confessed to us that you are an Otaku! If we spread around a rumor about your secret, what would happen? Your reputation would come crumbling down!"

"It won't crumble down."

The nurse casually replied as if she were teaching that 1 plus 1 equals 2.

"The only reason you know I'm an Otaku is because you two are also Otakus. And even if you start a rumor, there's no actual evidence that I'm an Otaku. No one's going to believe such a weak rumor."

"Nyu-u-t--."

That was the truth. The nurse added,

"And the only proof, this camcorder, is in my hands. It's the proof for both the fact that I am an Otaku, and that you two invaded my privacy. If you spread a rumor about me, I'll report this to the police. Then neither the school, nor your parents, would be too proud, yes?"

Oh, please, god, no.

I could feel my bones rattle in fear. Yeonji was silent for a second, and asked in a curious tone,

"...Wait. The proof that you're an Otaku? Did that camcorder actually record something?"

"It did."

Replied the nurse,

"My plan was to undo whatever you did after you two left, but I just had to continue the game where I had left off. I only started searching in the room a couple of hours later, so there should be enough of me recorded."

...She wasn't exactly a better person than either of us.

"But, that doesn't matter. This camcorder is in my hands now. I can just delete everything that was captured. Should I delete it now?"

"No way, woma-- Nyuuuuu---! Y-you can't delete that!"

"Hmm?"

The nurse became curious. Yeonji declared with confidence,

"Because that's the evidence we'll hand over to the police when we spread the rumor!"

"Hey, wait a sec..."

What are you saying?! Disregarding my objection, Yeonji continued with much faith in her words.

"But you yourself can't bring that to the police! Because if we get expelled as a result, it's going to become big news, and the contents of the camcorder might get released to the public!"

"..."

The nurse seemed faintly startled. Yeonji lowered her voice and whispered,

" 'Hey, did you hear that? Some freshmen got expelled for hiding a camera in the infirmary!' 'Really? What did they try to film?' 'A friend told me that...' - Like that."

That was quite plausible. As if to agree with Yeonji, the nurse remained silent. Yeonji continued excitedly,

"Then, if that kind of rumor spread around, all the attention will go straight to the infirmary, and that wouldn't be so nice for some nurse who wants to live a quiet Otaku life, right?"

Whoa, Yeonji, whoa.

With every word said, she spoke with more power and confidence. It was true that the nurse, as a closeted Otaku, could not afford to let the incident get huge attention.

By telling us that she is an Otaku, we were given a weapon to fight the one the nurse had against us.

The nurse was silent for a long time, intimidated by Yeonji's argument. After the pause, she finally opened her mouth and spoke,

"...You're right. Really, revealing that I am an Otaku was a mistake."

"Fufufu.."

Yeonji laughed maniacally.

"Then, hurry up and give us the infirmary as our club-"

"No, that's not it."

The nurse cut Yeonji's words short.

"Eh?"

The nurse left the area, noisily dragging her slippers around, and shortly came back. In a strangely disturbing tone, she sneered,

"I thought you'd give up if I scared you a little... Maybe it's because you're students of Eunsung? No, before that, it's probably because you found out I'm an Otaku like you two."

"Wh-what are you talking about?"

Reading the change in her tone, Yeonji stuttered. Like a chilling wind sweeping across a graveyard, the nurse whispered,

"Let's try this. In this camcorder, there exists both the proof of your crime and my weakness. Then, let's exchange this camcorder for the photo of you two naked and hugging each other."

""There aren't any photos like that----!!""

We both shrieked at the same time.

"Wh- what are you t-t-t-t-talking about?! Wh-why would there be a photo where I'm d-d-doing that kind of thing with th-this guy? Are you an idiot?!"

"Y-yeah! What are you saying?!"

We protested like a pair of baby birds crying for food. In contrast, the nurse's voice was so cold and evil that I could not believe it belonged to her.

"Hmm? Ah... that's fine. That's because the photo is something I'll take right now."

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa--! Somebody save me!"

Confirming the digital camera that was in the nurse's outstretched hand, we shouted our hearts out.

"Kyaa! Help me! Here! There's a pervert in the infirmary! A pervert who's about to violate students! Save me!"

"Fire--! Help! There's a fire in the infirmary---!"

Yeonji called for help with a small twist on the situation. I called for help, recalling that people are only willing to respond to 'Fire!' than anything else.

Our screams echoed and filled the infirmary, but the nurse was relaxed, unwilling to stop us.

"...Let me just add, I privately invested in the construction of this infirmary to make it 100% soundproof. No matter how much you scream, no one will hear you outside."

"What were you planning to do in here with sound proofing?!"

This nurse never failed to surprise us. Wait, it wasn't the time to be surprised by these things.

"W-waaaaaaait! Just wait a sec! Listen to me!"

"Okay, I'll listen to you. ...Until I finish preparing the camera. Hmm- it's been a long time since I used this, so I don't remember too well... Was this the zoom in button?"

The camera made a sinister 'whirr' sound. As the nurse engrossed herself in figuring out the camera, Yeonji repeatedly howled for attention.

"Just wait! Th-that is-- Right! You're a Clotaku just like us! It's probably more fun playing with us than being all alone in your room! Yeah!"

Even to this point, Yeonji did not give up on the infirmary.

"Well... Sorry, but I feel more comfortable being alone. And honestly, it's too much of a hassle."

She was right, if a little crooked. Yeonji's shouts became louder and more desperate in response.

"Waitwait! Think about it on a national scale! Our club will eventually become a

pioneer for changing this society around! It'll be a beacon of light for all the oppressed Otakus in this country! Give me a chance to eliminate the need to be a Clotaku!"

"Alright, I get it now."

"D-did you really?"

"Hmm? No, the camera's controls."

"Nyuuuuuuuuuuu-t--?! We're both Otakus, more so closeted Otakus, so why can't you understand my plan? Don't you want a country where Otakus can live happily? Don't you want to be saved?!"

What kind of society has perpetually happy Otakus? I wondered. Yeonji had some hopelessly huge ambitions contained in that small body.

However,

"Sorry, but I don't really want to be saved."

As Yeonji laid out her sentiments like a new leader of a political party, the nurse shut her down with a single comment.

"There is no country for Otakus, and there won't be in the future. ...I'm just fine with playing visual novels alone, hidden from other people. So, make your paradise in some other place."

"Nyuu--! You traitor! Coward! Scheming adult! You stupidly huge-breasted woman!"

And still Yeonji did not realize that the last part wasn't an insult. The nurse agreed composedly,

"Yes, I'm an adult unlike you two. Adults are always like that, scheming and conservative. Wow, it must be nice being young, you two~."

Separately from the argument that went on like a game of table tennis, the preparation for our ill-fated photo shoot seemed to be almost completed.

As she calmly deflected Yeonji's desperate pleas and threats, the nurse checked the remaining memory space of the camera, and took a test photo with the battery level in mind. She was unnecessarily focused for something like this.

"Now... Let's start taking everything off, shall we?"

"Sssttoooooopppp--!"

It was a humble tone, akin to 'let's go back home for tonight!'. Witnessing our impending doom become real, we once again screamed in unison.

"Stop it! No, seriously! Really! This isn't good! It's too weird! It's not gonna work! This is too crazy! Stopitstopitstopit-!"

"I want to stop here, too... but I can't really go back at this point. A saying goes, when you unsheathe a sword, you better cut something. Phew... Okay, you first!"

"Why me--?!"

"I never undressed a guy before. Well, it's my first time with school uniforms, but I'll do my best!"

"When did you undress a girl before?! Hyaaaaaaaaaaaahh-!"

... What's happening?

Yeonji made noises that could only be described as a death rattle. The noise was followed by unsettling squeals that felt like a tongue sliding around the roots of my nerves.

Swish, rustle, whatever they sound like- the sound of clothes sliding off were mixed in with hysteric voices.

"Nyaa-t... N-no... Th-that- you can't do this to me- Kyaa, no, time-out, where are you- eeek-..."

"Oh my... So cute. It's so smooth and white, I want to touch it!"

"You're touching it right nyaowwww--! Nyoo, nnnoooo! You're insane, hnh, th-this kind of, n-not yet... I'm not ready for thaaat--!"

It felt like playing a visual novel with the monitor off.

Ignoring the fact that the same was going to be done onto me later, it was a beautiful song in my ears.

Oh... damn.

Calm down, calm! It'll be fine if I just don't lid my flip! Wait no that's not it please calm down... There has to be a way to get out of this!

My brain was at full throttle.

Right now, I need to think of a way to... uh, stop that horrible thing from happening and avoid getting photographed, and also get this infirmary as our club room.

...

...

...Of course there isn't a way.

In terms of Starcraft, I was at a point where all of my expansions were destroyed, and my final Command Center is on fire. There was no potential for a miraculous result like that!

Even if such a potential existed, it was not too easy to think one up in this unsettling, disturbing environment. Even as I thought that, I could hear the

indecent, lewd sounds from beside.

"Your underwear's cute like a little kid's! I think you look good in it, though. Fufufu, fufu..."

"Wh-who are you calling a kid... Hyaaaaanh! S-seriously, stop it, I'm going to kill you... Ni-hiii~t..."

Fun.

Since I was incapable of blocking my ears, their voices flowed into my ears unrestricted. There could be no man out there who could keep focus in this situation.

"Argh..."

After a moment of torment, an idea hit me.

It was neither a good plan nor a perfect strategy, and it was more of an impulse. However, there was no time to waste.

There were vague hints for a correct action to take within our previous conversations. Before they escaped my grasp, I quickly intervened,

"Please, wait!"

"Hmm...?"

The indecent noises came to a pause, and the nurse answered.

"What is it? I'm almost done here... You just have to wait a little. Can you be patient and wait your turn?"

Done with what, exactly?

Pushing away the images that almost formed in my head, I quickly continued,

"Didn't you say that you play visual novels to read about teenagers building relationships?"

"...I did, but why?"

The nurse asked back with a hint of suspicion.

Hoping to end it all right in this turn, I closed my eyes and yelled,

"Then we'll show you ourselves how teenagers date--!"

Silence.

The noises from the side came to a complete halt.

The nurse, and Yeonji too, lost their words and everyone remained in silence.

Several moments later,

Conscious of the grave shift of the atmosphere in the room, I asked quietly,

"M-maybe real relationships don't do anything for you...?"

"...N, no, that's not it, but."

The nurse asked, embarrassed,

"Well, uh... Yes, when you say 'we', you mean, you and her?"

"Yes!"

"!#\$%^&*?!"

Yeonji screamed indecipherably, but I simply ignored her. Just shut up and watch!

"We'll show you how real high school kids go out! You just have to pretend like you started a new visual novel!"

"Oh, every day after school, in this room... you mean? Fufufu."

Understanding my plan right away, she softly laughed as if to commend me.

I did not intend to lie to her. She was always one step ahead of us, so a simple lie could not work. Then, the only way out was to make an offer that she could not refuse, even if she all that was involved in the deal.

"That's right! Visual novels are just games in the end, and all characters are 18 and over! Don't you want to see real 17 year olds dating? It'll be a on a different dimension than all the generic visual novels out there!"

I wasn't kidding. Real life is 3D, and visual novels are in 2D, so it was indeed on a different dimension.

The basis for this otherworldly plan was formed on account of what the nurse had said about her mindset when playing visual novels. That is, she had expressed how she feels younger just by looking at young people have dates, and how she enjoys observing the characters in visual novels.

And, from the dialogue with Yeonji,

--... It must be nice being young, you two.

--... Cute like a little kid's...

I'm sure most Otakus would wish that exciting things from 2D would happen in real life, too. Fans of visual novels would likely dream about going out with a plethora of cute girls.

Anyway, without being an Otaku whose mind is completely dominated with 2D world, it would not be so strange to wish for fantasies to materialize in real life.

And what about the nurse?

Although a visual novel fan, she was a strange type who would rather observe than participate in dating the heroines. Perhaps she wanted to see the same thing in real life, too; she seemed to be jealous of us, or, high school students. If I could use that as my foothold, I could lead myself out of this situation.

Having made that conclusion, I made the suggestion, pretending that Yeonji and I were going out already.

The nurse could now see that giving us the infirmary would not be 'full of hassles', but instead see it as 'installing a visual novel in real life'. She was more likely to consider our suggestion that way.

And, truly, she was very interested already.

If there were any problems with my plan, it would be...

"Wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha-what are you saying, you stupid idiot?! Who's dating who now?! D-don't say crap like that, you're out of your mind! Kill yourself right now! Stupid! Idiot! Bastard!"

...It would be that I never consulted with Yeonji with this plan and I had to act alone.

I sighed.

Yeonji cursed at me with all her might, with a stuttering voice like a motor was stuck on her throat. As if she were making up for being unable to kick me, she called me all sorts of unspeakable names.

She always seemed to be quick on the draw, yet she failed to get the hint for my plan. Sheesh.

That was my plan to get us out of here, you idiot! You just need to act like you're my girlfriend just once, and we'll have our club room! How's she going to care

about what we do after that when she's such a die-hard visual novel fan? Just go along with my plan!

--Not that I could actually say any of that, so Yeonji continued her curses uninhibited.

I'm so done.

Until Yeonji choked and stopped her rap of curses, the nurse kept silent. I closed my eyes and felt my face become hotter. The nurse giggled from the side.

"Phew... Ah, okay, hmm... Was that it? I see it now."

"Wh-why are you laughing and staring like that?!"

Yeonji recovered within three seconds and shouted back. I could assume that the nurse was facing Yeonji.

"Hmm? No... Fufu, yes, I thought that being young must be nice."

"Sh-shut up, you old woman! Act your age!"

" 'N-not yet~ I'm not ready for that~' "

"Nyaaaaa-t!!!"

With the nurse's mimicry, Yeonji shut her mouth after a short scream. What was that, some sort of magic spell?

The nurse laughed when Yeonji became silent. Several footsteps sounded from the side, and her face now loomed over me.

"Alright."

"Yes?"

I did not know what she meant. She shrugged and answered,

"...It sounds fun. I'll go with your suggestion."

"Whoa?!"

I did not think that she would accept it after Yeonji caused that much trouble for us; I embarrassingly blurted out an exclamation in surprise. The nurse had a smile of a mature, friendly smile.

"I'll let you two use that room, too... so come over after school. Fufufu, good for you!"

"Hm, hmph!"

The last comment must have been directed at Yeonji, as she reacted to it. Regardless, she seemed to be quite happy; even her grunts sounded uplifted.

"Now, say 'thank you, miss', will you?"

"Tsk. I'll say thanks for now."

When were you a Tsundere?

The nurse was less demanding and more suggesting, so Yeonji willfully thanked her back. The nurse spoke, satisfied,

"Thank your boyfriend, too. It's all thanks to him that everything went well, you know? Say 'thanks for helping me out'. Fufu..."

"Wh-who helped who?!"

Yeonji exploded like her entire body was propelling out of the bed.

"H-he is more like my minion than anything else! It's natural for a member to protect his leader! If I thank him for something like this, he won't know his place!"

Don't treat me like a dog, please. At least you could not say it when I'm right here, even if you really believe that.

Okay, I already knew she believed it, but still.

"Noo-way."

Though I felt exhausted and disconnected, the nurse was still quite stout and resolute. Following a short snap of a finger and Yeonji's yelp, Yeonji spoke uninterestedly,

"Hmph, tsk... W-well, you did well. Now that we have a club room, I mean. We're officially starting club activities tomorrow, so don't be late tomorrow! It's lethal injection for you, if you're late."

"...Yes, ma'am."

Her words contained more threats and thanks, but whatever. I answered unenergetically, and the nurse continued giggling at us for some reason.

And so-- After an entire week of a tiring journey, we finally gained a club room.

The infirmary wasn't such a normal place to be, and the room came at a price of a strange contract, but Yeonji was happy enough.

More so than anything else, I was happy enough that Yeonji had no reason to ever come back to my place. Now, I never had to face Mom's piercing stares, or her interrogations about Yeonji. I could no longer take them, so this incident finished at a fortunate time.

It's all good, it's all good.

"By the way, how long does this drug last? I still can't move my body at all..."

"Hmm... Yeah, it was the first time actually using that drug after making it, too. I honestly have no idea how long it lasts for."

"Whaaat?!"

"Normally, it lasts for one hour if you take one pill, so I gave you two... But the way drugs work, they don't have double strength just because you take double. Maybe four times, maybe six times."

"...?!"

"...Well, maybe you'll be okay if you sleep and wake up--."

"When do we get back home?!"

"You can always go back home tomorrow. Sometimes I sleep here after playing games, if the traffic is jammed."

"We're still students--!"

...It took four more hours before we could move again.

We could not simply explain that we were both quietly resting in the infirmary together, so we decided to say that we were working on a project at each other's homes.

...Quite naturally, my mom's stares became more painful to withstand.

5. Clotaku Inauguration

The next day, after school,

I headed towards our infirmary, which had finally become our club's meeting room.

My only mission to secure a clubroom was completed; and now, I just felt like resting in the peace of my own room, which was also thankfully freed from those dreaded meetings... but I would be killed if I did not attend our club meeting today.

I had a feeling that Yeonji would immediately invade my home, anyway, if I didn't show up.

I reluctantly dragged myself to the first floor, trying to reassure myself with the fact that my mom would not be supplied with any more stories to spread. I entered the infirmary, checked that no one was inside, and approached the inner door.

Knock, knock.

"Who's there?!"

Yeonji's voice called out from within; as I expected, she had arrived earlier.

More importantly, it's not so polite to go 'who's there' in that tone! What if anyone else knocked on the door? She should really be more careful.

"It's me." I answered bitterly.

She replied, "Who's 'me'?! Say the password!"

... Did we have a password? I pondered for a minute, but nothing came to my mind.

"It's me, Kang Injin. Stop kidding around and open up, or I'll just go home alone."

Click.

To my surprise, the door opened. From the open door, a black-haired girl of small frame walked out. Yeonji was pouting, clearly not in a good mood.

"Hey."

"Tsk."

I greeted her half-heartedly; she responded with a disapproving expression. What's the problem now?

After a moment of grumbling and pouting, Yeonji complained, "When I tell you to say the password, just say anything you can think of! A man's gotta have some imagination! You're no fun."

I ignored her nonsensical complaints and walked into the inner room. Although the entire infirmary was now our clubroom, our only usable space was this location.

Yeonji closed the door shut and followed me as I walked in.

She remarked, "I really think we should make a password for this room. Let's make one."

"A password, all of a sudden?"

It was really quite sudden. Yeonji immediately replied as if she were waiting for me to ask.

"It sounds like it could be fun. ...And we could stop any intruders from getting in."

...It was pretty obvious that she had thought up the second part as an excuse just now.

"Stop any intruders? Do we really have to do that, when you and I are the only ones who will come here? We could just figure it out from our voices."

"You might catch the cold and lose your voice!"

If you're sick enough that you'd lose your voice, it's probably better that you stay home!

I remained in silence, though I had many retorts in mind. A lesson I had learned since meeting Yeonji is that the saying 'silence is golden' is true.

"It's going to be fun for sure! We make a password that only Otakus would know. If

I ask '***sune', you answer with 'Mi**', and so on. Dumb, normal people wouldn't be able to answer, so they'd have to give up right away. Only the true Otakus get to enter the room! How is it?"

I remained true to the proverbial saying as Yeonji gave her speech. If we were to actually use that password, I'll probably kill myself first.

I asked,

"What about the people who need to ask for permission to stay in the infirmary?"

"They don't matter." Yeonji replied, as if nothing in the world truly mattered to her, "Anyway, let's set our password! This week's question and password will be 'a certain' and 'magical *****'. If you don't answer correctly, I'm not going to let you in here. Remember it!"

It's going to change every week?!

At the top of my throat were the words 'stop this crap right now', but I did my best to not betray the proverbial saying. However she interpreted my silence, Yeonji seemed pleased; I was finally able to put my backpack down and enter the room.

"Hello, Miss Yu." I greeted the nurse. All this time, she had been giving us a discomfoting stare from behind the computer desk, giggling.

"...Fufufu." The nurse nodded and smiled in response.

As I wondered about the meaning behind that smile, Yeonji seated herself in a couch directly across the table. She seemed to have something to say.

When I turned away from the nurse and gave her attention, Yeonji cleared her throat and began her little speech.

"Yesterday, we finally established the Clotaku Club."

...All we did was acquire a room for the club, but considering how we were planning on doing this unlawfully, I guess we can say we 'established the club'.

"So, what about it?"

"What do you mean, 'what about it'? When groups are established, isn't it obvious

that something must be done to raise the morale and cohesion amongst the members?"

"Like, a party?"

"No," Yeonji shook her head, "Well, that's good too... but I'm talking about an inaugural ball!"

"Inaugural ball?"

I still had no idea what she exactly wanted to do.

"I'll summarize for you. I'll introduce the reason for this club's creation, the history of the members, the purpose behind the club, and the future goals and such. Then announce our loyalty to the club, and then we have a grand party where we can eat and drink."

"Um, uh... Ah, okay."

I wondered to whom she wanted to introduce our club, but I waited in silence. Answers reveal themselves to those who wait; the answers are always in your heart.

"So, now, to celebrate our first club meeting... We'll have an inaugural ball with the three of us! Yaay--!"

"...Yay."

After that energetic announcement, Yeonji jumped off the couch. She turned around to face the nurse, who had a sour face, and I.

She began, "First off, I'll speak about the purpose of our club. Attention, everyone!" As if it were her dream to say 'attention everyone', she continued energetically, "To start off, our first mission is to be Otakus!"

As if I didn't know that!

"After school, every day, we gather here to establish communication between us Clotakus, and we enjoy Otaku activities. That is the most important philosophy behind our club."

"Maybe 'philosophy' is pushing it..."

"Shut up!" Yeonji suddenly slammed down on a desk, causing an annoyed look to surface on the nurse's face. "It might sound unimportant, but this is a mission that explains what we are! By being an Otaku here, we get rid of any dark urges by expending all of it here. Our activities in the Clotaku Club will solidify our existence as Clotakus!"

"Really?"

"Of course. So, in here, you can do whatever you want! Acting like a 2nd year in middle school, being a lolicon, it's all okay! Saying 'uguu' or 'auu', or even '-desu' are all fine! Right, when we greet each other, let's use 'ohayo'!"

"...I'll keep in mind."

Stop looking at me like you're saying 'so try doing all of that now'! And, seriously, being a lolicon just can't be safe, not just as an Otaku, but as a human being.

"And for our second mission!"

Yeonji began. We had another mission?!

"Yes, this is our ultimate goal, and the guiding principle that will decide what we need to do for the rest of our lifetime. Listen well."

"Lifetime goal? That's a pretty huge scale."

"Yes it is. Our second goal is... we will transform this country into a peaceful land where Otakus are not discriminated against!"

"...That's not gonna happen in our lifetime!"

I thought she had mentioned that to the nurse in an act of desperation. Apparently, she was serious.

"It has been many decades since the Otaku culture spread from a country beyond the sea. Since then, a certain minority called the 'Otakus' appeared in our country. And, as we know, the society is not too accepting of them!"

Yeonji looked around the room as she talked, as if to survey an imaginary crowd of

several thousand people.

"However, in the last few years, the term 'Otaku' spread around enough that the common folk use it. Also, although we have many Otakus in the higher social order, people's attitudes towards Otakus relaxed only by a tiny bit."

Just a tiny bit?

"Because a single level in the social order isn't enough to change an idea over an entire society..."

Yeonji prepared herself,

"If the ruling parties of this country were to all become Otakus, then the society's opinion will naturally turn around 180 degrees!"

"You seriously think that's possible?!"

Our republic, ran by Otakus? That's just too silly.

Yeonji continued, completely unfazed; "What's so impossible about it? A prime minister in a neighboring country got a certain beautiful nickname after getting caught reading a manga. With only one guy like that, people would go 'what kind of loser is he?' But if all of the higher-ups were Otakus, people would instead go 'is that such a good thing? Maybe I should try it out, too!'"

I had nothing to say to that. Her argument was ridiculous from the hypothesis, all the way to the conclusion.

"Heh heh, once the two-thirds of our parliament gets filled with Otakus, and then a bunch of Otaku-friendly legislation are written and passed, we're gonna end up with an Otakracy!"

"Okay, seriously, I'm an Otaku too, but even I think that's just stupid!"

"When it comes to Otaku laws, both the conservatives and the liberals would rise to pass legislation that favor the Otaku. It will be a textbook example of political landslide victory! The major parties might even merge together into the New Otaku Party."

"That sounds like the start of the parliament's doom! Also, how much of the

population has to be Otakus so that the Otaku party is the ruling party?!"

"Oh, the population won't be really full of Otakus."

"Then how did they get any votes for their power-?!"

"Those Otakus were all Clotakus before then. Until the election was over and the first parliamentary meeting took place, no one could have known that they were Otakus."

"What are they, some sort of Trojan virus?!"

"If they just act like an average politician and get elected... Then we'll have an Otaku country, ran by Otakus, for Otakus!"

"... The way that the politicians are forgetting the people who voted for them, it's not so different from what we have right now..."

"Doujinshi Reading Act passed in the parliament. One-figma policy also passed. Every morning, each household will receive a translated doujin along with the newspaper. The citizens would be utterly shocked."

"Don't do anything that'll make the citizens utterly shocked-!"

The worst part was that the citizens would be made to read the doujins first, rather than their original work!

"So, once we pass legislation like Television Anime Broadcast Time Standardization or National Otacare Law, South Korea's Otaku power level would pierce the heavens. Like Ota-Lagann!"

"The value of Yen would end up piercing the heavens..."

We'd pretty much be handing over our national treasury to our neighboring country.

"Heh... Everything I had said so far is only a small part of my grand scheme. I'll tell you the rest of it when we have time. I'll make sure that you'll take part in my Otaku ruling party."

"..."



OTAKU
WORLD

오덕으로!!!
대단한걸!!!

As it turned out, the founder of the Otaku party was going to be the girl in front of me. I was stupefied, seeing a glimpse of Yeonji's stupidly huge ambition.

She puffed up and pompously concluded, "Thusly, the Clotaku Club's second mission was that thing I just said."

"It's just a 'thing you said' to you..."

It was difficult to imagine what her entire scheme could be like.

"So-! In summary, first we promote Clotaku lifestyle, so that the society has a more relaxed attitude towards Otakus. At the same time, we improve our position in the society and become the upper class. Then, we use our influence to pollute the entire nation."

She said 'pollute'. She actually said 'pollute'! At least Yeonji recognized that she was on the good guys' side.

"Okay, even if I accept that you're making some sense, isn't that dream kind of too big for a small school club?"

"Hmph, you gotta aim high to succeed! You can't survive this world with a pansy attitude like that!"

Yeonji's vision of our society seemed to be a place where sanity is mercilessly unappreciated.

"And I'm not an idiot; I'm not saying we're going to do everything in three years."

"Well, yeah, even if three years pass, you don't have the rights to get elected into the parliament."

"I-I knew that much!" yelled Yeonji, raising her eyebrows, "I'll spend my three years in this school to test out my plans in smaller scale! If you think about what's special about this school, you should be able to see how our club activities here can become a good foundation for my plan."

"Something special about this school?"

"It's the Eunsung high school. What else do I need to say?" Yeonji asserted, "South Korea's most powerful school for elites! It's a place where the country's brightest

people are gathered. At least half the people from this school will end up having significant power in this nation. I'll guarantee you that."

"Yeah, I guess..."

All of the students here were recognized as geniuses, and they will graduate with the backing of Eunsung's name. They weren't likely going to grow up to be an average Joe, for sure; the fundamental principle of this school was to raise the elites of our society.

"So, I'm saying that I'm going to exercise the philosophy behind this school's existence. Before I graduate, I'll make sure everyone who graduates from here is an Otaku, before anyone even finds out."

"What are you saying?!"

If the school's administration were to hear of this, Yeonji would be kicked out of here before anyone even finds out.

"Really, this is a serious strategy. As we seed in the Otaku mindset in the future politicians, we set the groundwork for electing an Otaku ruler. In other words, it's an Otaku lobbying scheme."

Yeonji sounded like a spy trying to spread Communism throughout South Korea. Her eyes beamed as if to outwardly express her desire for revolution; it was almost scary.

I wondered if the school had any idea that they had accepted a revolutionist this year. I started getting worried.

"Wait... You didn't come to Eunsung just for that reason, have you?"

"I-I don't know."

Yeonji replied, turning around to face away from me. Why can't you say 'no'...?

"W-well, anyway," said Yeonji, under my judging glare, "we're going to have many things to accomplish from now on. As the leader, I'll guide you in the right direction, so you just have to believe me and do what I say. Hm- okay, do you have anything to ask? I said everything I needed to."

...And she totally forgot that she was going to do a speech about the members, and the history of this club or something. She was probably feeling too lazy to say the rest of it.

After a while, I raised my hand. "I have one thing to ask..."

"Alright, what is it~?" said Yeonji, like a teacher who was happy to hear a question from a student.

"You keep saying 'Clotaku', 'Clotaku'... So, are we seriously sticking with that name? It's a bit..."

...It sounds terrible.

Before that, the entire nature of the club is outright explained in the name itself. If it's a club for closeted Otakus, shouldn't it at least try to hide everything in the name? We could call it a 'modern society research club' or something similar.

"But we're the only ones who'd know about it!" replied Yeonji, in a frustrated tone, "The name of the club isn't important; it's what we do that's important. We don't even have this registered, so who cares if we call this 'Hentai research club' or 'adult video filming club' or whatever?"

Such a terrifyingly inappropriate remark did not fit her cute face.

"Even if we're the only ones saying it, isn't it the feel that's important? I think we can have a better name than 'Clotaku Club'."

Only someone like Yeonji could be fine with 'our Clotaku Club'. A guy like me simply won't be okay with a title like 'Clotaku Club' defining who he is.

"Sheesh, you're so persistent!" Yeonji pouted and exclaimed, "Fine, if you really want to, let's think up a better name. ...How's SOS Brigade?"

"...What does it stand for?"

"Seo Yeonji's Otaku Sentimentalizing Brigade."

"That's a terrifying name!"

It was terrifying in many different ways. And the name is a direct rip-off!

"It's not a rip-off! It's a parody!"

"...Is that so. Anyway, forget that name. I have a feeling we'll be in a world of copyright troubles."

"Psh... Then how's the Otaku Neighbors Club? Established because we can't find Otakus around, we gather people who want to make Otaku friends..."

"Why do you have to pick only the major titles to rip off?!"

To start with, did she really have to refer to fictional works just to think up a club name? I sighed.

Yeonji retorted in an annoyed voice. "Hmph, I told you, the name of the club isn't too important. If you really want a different name, come up with it later. For now, we'll just call it 'Clotaku Club' as a temporary thing. Once our club becomes official, we'll give it a name and assign positions in the club to the members."

"Do we even have proper positions to speak of in this club?"

"We have positions right now. I'm the leader, the nurse is the supervisor, and you're a member. Done." replied Yeonji, almost immediately.

"That's stupid!"

...Is it just me, or am I the only unimportant person in here?

Yeonji narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. "Once we have more members in the club, we'll split this group into anime club, manga club, and light novel club, and I will become the big boss. By that time, we'd have registered this club and we would have risen to the top. You got that?"

Yep. Basically, we're stuck with 'Clotaku Club' forever. Realizing this, I shut my eyes and gave up questioning her.

Happy with the progression thus far, Yeonji giggled and declared, "Alright, then we're done with that topic... And so our inauguration ball ended in success! Yaay-!"

"...Yay."

Yeonji ended the meeting selfishly, much like how she started it. Somehow, she seemed to believe that we made progress. It was too silly to call it a meeting at all, but at least I found out the basics of Yeonji's plan.

...In summary, she's a scary girl.

Though I never expected that the big party after the meeting would ever happen, the nurse began, "Hey... is it over now? You can get some drinks from that fridge over there, if you want."

"Pardon me?"

"We're celebrating the success of the inaugural ball," the nurse smiled, her chin resting on her hand, "I only have cup noodles to eat, but I can at least serve drinks, right? Get me coffee, while you're at it."

"Hmm? Ah, oh, uh, sure."

I walked over to the fridge in the corner of the room and got the drinks. I thought I saw a bunch of blood packs in there, but I ignored it. It's the infirmary, so, I guess that's normal...?

Yeonji grabbed the can of Sikhye without a moment's hesitation, and the nurse took the can of coffee. I returned to the couch and opened a can of cola.

"Thanks for the drinks, Miss Yu."

I took a sip from the can. Yeonji was already done with her drink, and she was struggling to get the last bits of the rice within the can. She's too childlike, sometimes.

I continued sipping my cola as I thought about the lack of manners of teenagers these days. Yeonji was now hunting for the rice by shoving her finger inside the can. The nurse was drinking her coffee as she played something (probably a visual novel) on the computer.

The room was quiet for a while, other than the occasional sound of mouse clicks from the nurse and weird grunts from Yeonji.

"...By the way," I began, no longer able to withstand the silence, "What do we... exactly do from now on? The club activities, I mean."

"Nyuun?" Yeonji stopped fiddling with the can and faced me. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we have a club room, and we finished the inauguration or whatever, so shouldn't we start the club activities now? But what do we do?"

"Just do whatever you do as an Otaku." Yeonji replied confidently, "The first mission of Clotaku Club is to be Otakus! I said that five minutes and twenty-three seconds ago, you idiot. Do whatever you want. As long as you're in here, have the time of your life. End of story."

"...Is that it?"

Even if you say 'time of your life'...

I had no clue where I should start. I pulled out the PXP from my backpack and quietly started a game, while Yeonji threw out her can and pulled out a light novel.

We continued this trend for the rest of the day, until we had to go back home.

...It wasn't all that exciting.

6. Clotaku Activities, Day 2

The next day, after school,

It was only one day after the 'inauguration' of our Clotaku Club -- I ended up calling it 'Clotaku Club' myself -- and we gathered at the infirmary to continue our club activities.

In this newly created club, the unbounded enthusiasm generated by its members truly pierced the skies; the members' growing excitement physically heated up this small club room.

The members were eager to serve, and the supervising teacher selflessly offered them guidance. The club president had made great use of her awe-inspiring leadership to induct the geniuses of Eunsung into the club.

In a single day, the club's name became widely known in the school. Numerous Otakus emerged from hiding to apply for the club, crowding the infirmary, and the club was growing bigger by every passing second.

Little did they know by then, Eunsung High School's students were the first to witness the great beginnings of a powerful wave that would sweep the country...

... would be what Yeonji could only dream for.

At that moment, our club members' activities were as follows:

1. Seo Yeonji, reading a light novel while having a drink that she had raided from the fridge as soon as she had arrived. Not a single noise was heard from her since then, other than the occasional giggling.

2. Yu Youngseon (supervisor), who had been seated at her computer ever since I entered this room, playing a visual novel; she hadn't moved an inch from her seat.

It was quite unsettling how she was staring intently into the monitor as if she were lovingly caressing it.

3. Me, who entered the club room, witnessed the above two, then thought it would be for the best to not disturb them, and began playing a game on my PXP. The atmosphere of this room was seriouslyveryamazinglyextremely bothersome.

'... What the hell is going on here? It's like I'm having deja vu; I thought I'd already seen this scene play out before in my life...

... And this is the exact same crap we did yesterday! We're even sitting precisely at the same places as before!'

It almost felt like I had gotten in a time machine and went back to the previous day.

'Th-this is strange... does this happen all the time in school clubs? There's no way.'

My expectation for a club activity was something more cheerful and energetic, where I could get in touch with my teenage soul and mind. Even if that's asking for too much, I'm sure 'club activities' don't involve scattering around the room and not exchanging a single word for hours!

The level of awkwardness I was feeling at the moment was akin to the level of an Otaku who had been forced into a blind date with a bunch of non-Otakus.

It was a terribly, horridly awkward moment.

With the atmosphere like that, I couldn't continue playing my PXP quietly. I halfheartedly mashed the buttons as I patiently waited for the two others to make a move.

After thirty minutes of aimless mashing, Yeonji finally closed her novel. Oh, finally.

"Phew--"

Yeonji put the closed book in her bag as she sighed deeply. It must have been a

decent read.

"Niiyyaaaa--"

She slid off from the couch and began stretching, turning her upper body from side to side. Cracking and snapping sounds came from her waist. She sat in the same posture for an entire day, that was to be expected.

After shaking her small body around for a while, she nodded to herself, satisfied. She looked like a kitten after a long yawn.

"Hmm, hmm."

Yeonji sat back down in her seat, stretching her neck. Then, right before my desperation-filled eyes, she scrounged around in her backpack, and produced the next novel to read--

"Sttttttoooooopp iiiiitttttttt--!!"

I shouted with all my might.

"Agh! Why'd you scream like that, all of a sudden?!"

Yeonji briefly squirmed, and then angrily glared at me. She was honestly surprised, apparently. This time, however, I did not just stand idly.

"Oh, come on! How can you people just do nothing all day?! It's been two whole hours since I got here, and everyone's been doing their own crap all this time! We went through so damn much to get this club, and what we're doing is exactly the same as what we normally do when we're by ourselves! I don't even remember why I'm here in the first place!"

My pent-up emotions burst out as if I were casting the Five-Finger MeraOOOO. Yeonji was momentarily stunned by my outburst, but she quickly recovered and then nodded in agreement.

"Nyu-n... ...You're right, I guess. Since we're all here, we might as well do something together."

"Did I really have to shout to make you realize that?!"

I thought I should shut up and let her continue, but...

"Then, should we play a dating sim together?"

"That's not a group activity--!!"

...Of course, Yeonji just said something stupid again.

"No no, even dating sims can be played as a group. People make co-op modes for that now, you know."

"Co-op dating sim?!"

That was the first I had ever heard of it! What even is that?

"Yeah, it's in a 2D fighting game format."

"What kind of dating sim plays out like a fighting game?!"

"If you fight and take damage, your character's clothes rip off. Once one character's health gets depleted, the winner does all sorts of terrible things to the loser."

"That's not a dating sim! There's none of the 'dating' in there!"

What's worse is that you actually want to play that with a guy!

"Hmph, if that's not good enough for you, there's always an MMO-style dating sim."

"MMO dating sim?!"

Even more new-age concepts entered the fray.

"Yep. Like a normal MMORPG, you just make your account and character, and get right into playing it."

"...I have a feeling that game will fail, since everyone will be male characters."

"That's okay. In that game, the heroines are basically AI characters that spawn randomly across the world."

"...Before we move on, it actually is about dating, right? You don't just hack and slash the heroines down, right?"

"Of course not! You date them normally."

"Well, that's surprisingly norm--"

"When you enter the first village, a gentle-looking old man gives you a quest, like, 'go to the east of this village, win over 20 brunettes, and bring back their panties.' As you finish those quests, you level up and take on higher-level girls."

"--Not normal at all!"

That is a seriously messed up system. What kind of gentle-looking old man gives a screwed up quest like that, anyway?! And I don't even get how the 'combat' system works. What do you even do with the girls?

"Oh, you just give them presents or say nice things to them."

"That's just horribly--..."

...People let that kind of thing in our country? Are our game publishers actually owned by monsters? It was almost impressive how twisted the game is.

"And you can go on big raids, too, since some girls are impossible to beat with only one player... so you'd need at least a group of 20 people working on them at the

same time to win them over."

"...And I almost thought it might be a decent game..."

It gave me a headache to imagine a huge group of male characters surrounding a single heroine to all court(!) with her at the same time.

"While joining a party is primarily for those big raids, playing solo still gets frustrating when there are jerks around who steal your heroines at the very last moment. It's infuriating when that happens."

"You can even get date-stolen..."

I gave up thinking about the game seriously.

"If that's not enough, you can always make other players look bad to make yourself look better to the heroines in comparison. Or you can quietly knock the heroines out with a baseball bat, so you can force a hospital scene, though you'd probably be doomed if you get found out."

"That puts other open-world games to shame, huh."

According to Yeonji, the game takes place in some lawless dystopian world.

After my repeated visions of terror, I no longer had the energy to continue listening. Before I shut up entirely, I asked Yeonji a final question:

"So, what is that game? Where's it from?"

It seemed probable that the game may have been produced in this country, but at the same time, it seemed amazingly unlikely that such a game would be allowed in the first place. Though I have zero interest in gaming, if such a game existed, at least some of the websites I browse would have had something about it. A game that was close to its release, maybe?

"Huh? You really believed it? Of course a game like that wouldn't exist. I just made

it up."

"Oh, screeeeewww yooouuu--!"

I've been had.

"Heh, even if South Korea is known for mass-producing all sorts of online games, what kind of brainless company would decide to make a game like that? I thought, 'what if I made a game myself?' And so I ended up with those ideas. Wasn't it pretty great?"

I should have known from the steady stream of horrifying ideas that she had been spouting; she came prepared. Thanks to that, I felt pretty idiotic.

Yeonji crossed her arms and mischievously grinned, obviously happy that I foolishly believed her.

"Fufufu... Well, from your reaction, I can see that the ideas aren't completely unusable. While we probably can't make that game with our current technology, once I become a ruler of this country and our technology is at a good level... Nii-hee-hee-hee!"

Yeonji laughed like a maniac. I learned at that moment that she wasn't just interested in ruining the South Korean government, but also our gaming industry.

Since the scale of the game was indeed too huge, I stopped worrying about her plan. At least she wasn't likely going to suddenly give up on high school to become an indie game developer.

...But honestly, if a game like that existed, I'd play it just so see what it would be like. As long as I don't end up getting involved in its production.

After some more banter on similar topics, it was already time to go back home.

At one point, the nurse also became engaged in our scholarly discussion about

dating sims-- and after that was the end of our daily club activity.

When I looked at my watch after our discussion, I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly time had passed while I was engrossed in the conversation.

Although the fact that we accomplished nothing important did not change...

Somehow, I had more fun than I did yesterday.

7. The Pubtaku Queen

Lunchtime.

If it were any other day, it was the time to run to the cafeteria like a lemming sprinting towards a nearby lake, gobble down the lunch, and partake in a merciless territorial dispute for the school fields that resembled the history of Korea in the third~seventh century.

But today wasn't the day for such happiness; again I found myself walking towards the infirmary, feeling like I've chewed on a bug while eating.

...Please excuse me if this situation sounds familiar.

Really, if not for Seo Yeonji, why would I deny myself my own lunch break to take a trip to the infirmary on such a fine day? I'd have to be insane to go by my own will.

We got the club room, we had a party, and we finally started to have decent club activities-- so what's the problem, you ask?

...You should know what I had in my hands at the time: a bunch of random crap that I've been moving with all my effort. There were consoles like the PX3, PX2, along with their various games, light novels and manga, animation DVDs, and even a few board games. They were items that could be summarized as 'Otaku goods' which were like oxygen to us Otakus.

Regardless of whether they're supposed to be oxygen or nitrogen or whatever, having to carry so many, I felt like I would keel over at any moment.

The reason why I was put under this undue stress traces back to the letter that I received from Yeonji this morning...

Yes, a letter.

The first thing I found after taking a seat at my desk in my homeroom was a letter-- written in a font that was all too familiar.

She probably had a few envelopes left over from the last time.

Just in case it's unclear why Yeonji was still using such a cumbersome way of messaging me, Yeonji and I still haven't exchanged our phone numbers. I see her every day anyway, and I always assumed she wasn't the type to text too often, so I never got around to asking for her number. Yeonji didn't seem to want mine, either, so that was how it was.

The unfortunate side effect was that she had to communicate by mail, which brought back a few unpleasant memories of mine.

In any case, the content of the letter with a picture of a chick was:

"I brought all my Otaku goods that I've been hiding in my house. They're at the security office now, so bring them over to our club room at lunch. If you ever slack off, I'll have you executed by impalement."

'Heh, I guess even Yeonji realized that we have nothing to do at the club. It's probably a manga or two that she brought, but damn it, lunch time again?! I better do it as quickly as possible, so I can enjoy my lunch for once.'

...That was my naive, optimistic plan at the time. No one could have ever expected that Yeonji owned this much crap! When I entered the mentioned security office without a clue, the room resembled a storage room than anything else; a huge percentage of the room consisted of stacks of boxes at that moment.

It had been thirty minutes since I began moving the first stack of the boxes, cheered on by the security guard who had been devastated by the sight of his office. And yet, the mountain of boxes did not decrease in size at all.

...How the heck did she manage to bring everything to school in the morning, and why? Is she insane?

Though, I did find it strange that the letter was in my desk by my very first class in the morning. She probably prepared everything extremely early in the morning.

She has guts, I'll give her that. How could she leave the Otaku goods with the security guard so carelessly? I have no idea what he might have done if he saw what was in the boxes.

'*Crack!* *Bang!*

"Oh- crap! Noo!"

The bottom of the box exploded open within my hands.

Stricken with panic, I hastily stopped its contents from falling out, renewing my surprise that the boxes were indeed filled with the PX console series and their various games.

Seriously, Yeonji wanted to bring an entire PX3 to school? She's really bold.

Anyway, she'd murder me instantly if I threw all of these away. I gathered the items back into the box and hugged the box as if it were a baby, and then I continued onwards to the infirmary...

...And that's what happened back then.

After that initial rip on the box, it started to break down even further. I was forced to throw away the box near the infirmary, and so I've been carrying only its contents.

'This is seriously annoying! I never had the time to have my lunch, too.'

Incidentally, Yeonji never specified that I needed to move everything before the end of the lunch break! I felt a little sorry for the security guard (nothing to be said for Yeonji) but I decided that I should move everything after school instead.

I honestly didn't care if Yeonji was actually going to try and execute me by impalement or whatever. She can do whatever she wants!

I opened the door to the infirmary with growing apathy. I put down the items that had caused immense pain in my arms, wiped the sweat off my head, and announced my entry in front of the club room.

"I'm coming in-... ...?"

I turned the door handle, only to find the door locked tight.

It was not unusual for it to be locked, but I knew that, earlier today, the nurse had left the door open with an unwelcoming face after she had learned that I was tasked with bringing Yeonji's games into the club.

I faced the door to give it a knock, but then a written note on the door caught my

eye.

'Out of office'

"..."

What kind of business could she have outside of the infirmary? Such unfortunate timing, too.

'Well, she's not the type to spend a lot of time outside of her room, so she'd be back soon. I should get some rest on a bed in the mean time.'

With that thought, I began finding a hiding spot for the items that I had practically threw down on the ground.

But suddenly,

'*Knock knock*'

The most unfortunate noise echoed from the entrance of the infirmary.

"Wha...?!"

I reflexively turned around and saw a shadow looming on the opposite side of a translucent window. Add that fact up with the knocking from before... Was that a stranger outside?!

Thinking logically, neither the nurse nor Yeonji would bother to knock; the nurse essentially owned this place, and Yeonji simply lacked the courtesy to do so.

Then, the person outside was neither of the two... but someone completely unrelated to Clotaku Club!

To analyze the situation at hand:

1. All the Otaku goods from Yeonji were in plain sight on the floor.
2. There was an outsider about to enter the infirmary.
3. And if I were to be seen here with them... Oh, boy.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!--!"

I immediately began hiding the Otaku goods as I let loose a loud scream. I need to hide them quickly!

The looming shadow outside remained quiet, likely because no one answered the door. If I did not fully hide these cursed things in the meantime, my closeted Otaku life was going to meet an explosive end.

"....."

But... where was I supposed to hide them? The club room's door was locked, and there were no suitable containers in sight.

The front door began to slide open.

'Waah-! Wait! I don't know who you are, but just wait! Just give an extra knock or two on the door- how impatient can you get?!'

Before that thought began forming in my head, my body was springing to action.

Faced with a life-threatening crisis, I instinctively jumped off the ground and leapt for a bed. I hugged the Otaku goods as I dug into the bed, pulling a blanket over my shoulders.

'With this, maybe I could pass off as a 'Random Male Student 1'...'

Cold sweat dropped from my body. I hid myself with such speed that I never knew I could reach, yet the distance to the bed was great enough that the person outside could have seen me leap.

'I am a random student, I am a random student, I am a random student...'

'*Clack-clack-clack...*'

A gentle sound of footsteps passed by as I chanted a mantra to myself. Following that noise was '*tap-tap-tap*', the sound of polite knocking. No doubt remained that the person was not Yeonji; If she ever had to knock, the sound would rather be '*bang bang*' or '*crack*'

After the knocking, silence persisted for some time. Perhaps the person found the

memo stuck on the door.

As if to prove I was right, the same sound of footsteps filled the room once more. But the noise did not move towards the front door; instead, the noise was growing in intensity, approaching my direction.

'Ah- oh, god, I'm so dead.'

I hugged the items in my arms even tighter. If I were to show myself to a random stranger in this state...

... Let's just say, it was a scene that I wouldn't even share it with another Otaku.

With complete disregard to my train of thought, the footsteps continued to near my location. I closed my eyes in fear.

"Hmm?"

It was an unfamiliar voice.

The voice, which carried a hint of interest or perhaps curiosity, was definitely neither from Yeonji nor the nurse. It was a beautiful, clear voice, as if it could only be produced by drinking the morning dew, yet it resounded with authority and power.

The back of my head grew itchy; I could feel the owner of the voice fixing a gaze in my direction.

'What are you looking at? If there's no movement, it's obviously a simple corpse. I'm supposed to be dead, so if you could just leave me alone...'

--But to actually vocalize that comment proved impossible, since my stressed heart and lungs refused to cooperate.

"Huff, huff..."

I did my best to appear asleep, but heavy breaths escaped my lips due to the tension. I was afraid that my loud heartbeats could also be heard.

"... Excuse me."

Something poked at my body from outside the blanket.

Apparently, it was hoping for too much when I believed that I'd still look like I was sleeping after making so much noise; the voice that had called out was directed to someone who was wide awake.

Aw, damn it all.

I opened my eyes ever so slightly. In the narrow vision I had, I could see the finger that had apparently poked me.

"...Ahem, cough, cough." I coughed awkwardly.

There was promptly an annoyed response,

"You are very clearly pretending to be asleep, and yet you persist at being ignorant of my presence? ...Are you intending to make a mockery out of me?!"

--Oh.

My body suddenly shook; I was struck with a mysterious, overwhelming feeling from the girl's speech. How should I describe it...? It was a familiar feeling, one that I was sure to have felt before in my life, yet impossible to comfortably withstand.

Yes, to bluntly describe it--

"Hmph, what do you think you are doing? If you received the honor of being addressed by me, you should at least have the manners to face me properly! It is regrettable that the only man here is an uncultured brute."

...It was the feeling of proxy embarrassment. I cringed by bodily reflex, my throat began to itch, and I felt the ends of my fingers and toes roll inward. Dry, hacking coughs followed.

I turned around with the motion of a robot.

Standing in front of me was a lone girl.

Her eyelashes made a sharp, wide curve on her face as if to hint her personality, accompanied by her smooth, white face that was creased only with an expression

of anger. Her pointed nose and her puffy lips added maturity to her face that was incomparable to an average high school student, and her shapely physique added up to a certain display of beauty.

She stood, hands mounted on her thin, curved waist, looking down at me like a great lioness standing over her fallen prey; I felt almost intimidated.

And, on top of all that--

The girl's hair was perfectly golden.

"...Uh, wha--?"

Witnessing that oddity, I sat, stunned.

No, seriously, that really was blonde hair.

Compared to other schools, our school imposed a relaxed dress code (anything goes as long as you work hard) but dyeing your hair was strictly forbidden. So, what explains her golden hair?

'Wait, no, maybe that's her natural hair! A foreign exchange student, or something inherited from an English parent? Wasn't that kind of character trait only found in games?'

"Sigh-."

As if to make light of my surprise, the girl elegantly brushed her golden hair aside with her smooth hands. In contrast, her face displayed anger.

"How rude, expressing such surprise whilst beholding my visage! Have you lost your mind after gazing at my beauty? You should know your place, peasant."

Uuuuugghh...

I shook once more at the creeping feeling flowing through the tips of my limbs.

'I... I never thought I'd hear something like that in the 3D world!'

Within the flood of pain so powerful that it could dismember me the moment I lose focus of myself, I realized a critical fact: whether she is a foreign exchange

student or a Korean-European or whatever, it was not important.

This girl... is an Otaku!

Her Otaku power level was too great for any natural resistance to fend against it. If I had a Scouter in my hands, her power would have overloaded it, causing it to explode.

As said before, Otakus can easily recognize other Otakus.

At that moment, the Otaku detector within me screamed uncontrollably, indicating that the girl in front of me was, without any need for further confirmation, a pure Otaku.

My body tensed up and froze. I brought all of my attention to the Otaku goods within my arms.

Like the girl had said herself, she was pretty good-looking; no one would want to be seen hugging Otaku goods in front of a cute girl, never mind that she is an Otaku like me.

"E-excuse me, hoow can I heelp yoouuu...."

I spoke timidly, overwhelmed with a strong desire to get out of the situation. I talked in a very polite tone for some reason.

From a quick glance in her direction, she was a first year student without a name tag just like me... but somehow, it felt natural that I spoke to her in a polite way. What was I going to do if she started going 'How dare you speak to me so impolitely, you ignorant peasant!?'

The girl smiled in satisfaction when I began to grovel.

"At least you are wise for realizing your ignorance sooner. Hmph! I will forgive you. Let me ask one question; where is the supervisor of this room? I will allow you the honor of answering my question!"

Someone, please, unfold my wound-up limbs. At this rate, I'm going to turn into a spiral galaxy!

"I-I don't know. I think she might come back sometime soon-- probably..." I replied,

sweating a flood as I held tightly onto the Otaku goods. Even objectively, I looked pathetic.

"Is that so...? What a useless peasant!" cursed the golden-haired girl, frowning. It was difficult to tell whether she meant me or the nurse. Either way, my limbs were beginning to lose their functions. "...Regardless, what are you doing here?"

Despite my silent prayers of 'Please leave if you're done asking questions!' the girl asked with a hint of suspicion. Why are humans such inconveniently curious creatures?

"Huh? Oh, uh... I have a slight stomachache right now... I'm just resting for a bit! Aha-ha, ha-ha-ha."

"--Hae."

The girl let out an anime-catchphrase-like sound and continued to stare in suspicion, regardless of my best excuse.

Then, after some time when I took notice of her bright blue eyes, I became aware of the subject of her attention.

She was looking at the spot right next to where I lay: the obvious mound on the bed sheet, propped up by the Otaku goods.

"...Cough, cough!"

I coughed to create a diversion while I rolled over to cover up the spot. I must have roused her suspicion when I turned around to look at her, revealing what should have remained hidden.

'...She wouldn't try to pull the blanket away while I'm still on the bed, would she?'

"Cough. Cough."

"Hmmm...~?"

As I awkwardly faked my coughs with a growingly red face, I felt the fiery glare from the golden-haired girl attack my back.

Before I had any chance to brainstorm my potential responses to her inevitable

question of what was under the blanket, she had already opened her mouth to speak...

"You--..."

'Nooo--!'

'*Rattle-* *Rattle-*'

But then, the infirmary door began sliding open. Then entered the voice of Yu Yeongson, "Is... someone there?"

'Oh, hell, that was too close.'

It couldn't have been a better time. The nurse wandered over to us and, upon seeing the girl, greeted her with a tinge of tiredness, "Oh, my... So, it was you."

"How are you, Miss Yu?"

It seemed that the nurse knew the girl.

The nurse's droning voice continued, "...I'm pretty sure I gave my answer for our talk from before. Do you have something else to tell me?"

"I had been on the case myself, but I haven't made much progress. I came here to ask you if you might reconsider."

"Reconsider..." replied the nurse, sounding uncomfortable, "Well, okay... Then, should we talk? Let's go inside first."

"...Excuse me, what about this man?"

"He said he had a stomachache... I told him to rest here for a bit since he had permission from his teacher already. ...Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all."

...How persistent. Even as she gave up and left, it was obvious from her glare that she was still suspicious of me.

"Then, let's go inside. ...Hey, it's almost the end of lunch! You should also get back

to your class soon."

"...Okay." I spoke hesitantly.

As the nurse left, she pointed under the bed without the girl knowing. I quickly understood what she wanted; as soon as the two disappeared into the inner room, I placed the Otaku goods under the bed and escaped the infirmary. She would take care of the stuff there later.

I amazed myself with how nervous I had become. Sweat covered my entire back. I couldn't imagine what terrible things might have happened if the nurse did not appear at that moment.

...Still, I wonder what was up with that girl.

Reminded of the terrible, judging stare that had bombarded my back side, I suddenly began fearing for my future.

* * *

Later that day, after school,

After successfully moving all the remaining boxes, encouraged by Yeonji's unending rage, I fell down on the club room floor in total exhaustion, groaning, "I... I did it-..."

I reaffirm that a normal human mind can't possibly comprehend Yeonji's behavior.

Wasting no time, Yeonji began screaming at me like a slaver cracking her whip.

"Wha-?"

"Don't go 'wha-!' If you're done moving them, then open them and organize everything that's inside! Hmm-- Hey, nurse! Can I put my manga and light novels on those shelves? You won't need to keep those medical books in a club room, anyway, right?"

"Mmh, sure!" The nurse replied, bearing a grimace. Though it'd be rude to say this, I'm sure her future children would grow up to be spoiled brats.

Yeonji frantically ripped open the boxes as I gave a worried glance. After some time, she turned around to shout, "Alright! Take out all those weird, thick books from those shelves and replace them with these! What are you doing, get over here!"

"...You're talking to me...?"

This wouldn't have happened if Yeonji organized the books instead of reading light novels as I was moving those boxes. Plus, I was extremely tired; thanks to a certain someone, I was starving and overworked over my only lunch break.

"No whining!" Yeonji snuffed out my complaints with a single command. "A man's gotta have dedication and tenacity! Can you really call yourself a man after getting tired from carrying a box or two? If you don't have any strength, I'll transfer mine over."

"Aaargh!"

She jumped out of her shoes and began harshly kneading my sides with her feet. What the hell?

"Ow! Hey, hey, hey! It hurts! How could you step on a person like that?! Stop it, now!"

I screamed in pain and surprise at the sudden ambush. In response, writhing around in pain on the couch.

Yeonji's pink lips distorted into a smile, then she put extra strength to her feet and replied, "Why? My daddy asks me to push harder when I knead on his back like this."

"That's a completely different scenario!"

So don't make that face that says 'Why don't you ask me to step on you harder, too?!'

Though, rather than the pain inflicted on my sides, the fact that I could see underneath Yeonji's skirt was more unsettling.

Whether or not she knew, she teased me in an uplifted tone, "Hmph, blushing from getting stepped on by a lady like that-- Are you actually happy about it? Be

honest."

"Are you insane?! That's not true at all!"

"Wh-what's the reason for it to be completely untrue?!"

My immediate response was met with Yeonji's temper. Would you rather have me be a pervert who gets happy from getting stepped on by a girl?!

"Now, now, don't fight..."

Stopping the stalemated battle between the energetic Yeonji and I, the nurse's face bore a disturbing smile like she had seen the world's greatest S&M-themed visual novel.

"Since Injin here looks too tired today, why don't we stop here... and clean up the rest tomorrow. I'll help you then, too," said the nurse, keeping her smile up while talking to the very same girl who called her medical journals as 'weird thick books'. That's how adults are different from kids, I suppose.

"Hmph!" grunted Yeonji, looking very displeased in contrast to my awestruck gaze for the nurse. "Then, we'll do the rest tomorrow. Let's relax for now."

"You've been relaxing all this time, you jerk."

Ignoring my condemnation, Yeonji hopped away on one leg to retrieve her shoe that had been thrown away.

After watching Yeonji with a playful smile, the nurse spoke, "...Injin?"

"Yes?"

"Get yourself a drink from the refrigerator."

"...Okay."

...I wasn't sure what to make of it, but I took her offer nonetheless.

* * *

After the raging war between Yeonji and I,

Having enjoyed a moment of relaxation with a drink from the refrigerator, I had a chance to ask the nurse, "By the way, who was that girl who came here during lunch?"

I had almost forgotten about it when I was too busy moving the boxes. I remembered the terrible ordeals I suffered because of the golden-haired girl almost finding out about the Otaku goods.

At that time, the only thought racing through my head was that I should escape from the infirmary. In retrospect, however, the nurse and the girl obviously knew each other, so I became curious of the girl's history.

"... 'That girl'?" asked Yeonji, rising like a cobra twisting out of a basket.

Why her face had to be contorted at the sound of 'girl' I wanted to ask, but I answered honestly at the fear of losing my only break time by Yeonji's tantrums. "Yeah, I met this girl while I was moving the boxes earlier..."

I didn't feel like explaining in detail, so I gave a summary: golden hair, blue eyes, first year student, and embarrassing tone of speech.

I hoped that Yeonji would not become overly interested if I gave her fewer details. However, her actual reaction was completely unexpected.

"It's the Pubtaku Queen..." muttered Yeonji, making a face like she had a glob of wasabi in her mouth.

I asked, just in case I had misunderstood her, "A what queen?"

"The Pubtaku Queen." Yeonji replied, clearly annoyed. "The culmination of all Otakus of Eunsung. One in a thousand. If the seventh century Silla had Queen Seondeok and Jindeok, the twenty-first century Eunsung High School has the Pubtaku Queen."

I had no idea what any of that meant. Moving away from Yeonji's grumblings, I turned to the nurse for clarification.

"That girl... her name is Eun Yerin--," began the nurse, "And she's easily described as a 'Publicized Otaku' (Pubtaku). She's been famous since middle school; a rumor

goes, she brings a maid and a butler with her to school every day..."

"A maid and a butler?!"

They exist in real life?!

"Hmph! That's not the worst part. I heard she brings a tablet just to watch anime in class at lunch, and one time, she wore a fancy dress to school instead of the school's uniform! Sometimes, she reads visual novels in the middle of a class with a laptop! She also has a weird club that sells doujinshi at every school event!"

Yeonji intervened, telling a story that jumped between a non-fictional biography and a fantasy novel. At that level, it may as well have been a horror story.

"Can... can she really do all that?"

I meant to ask if the school was allowing all of that to happen. Yeonji misunderstood, baring her teeth and opening her eyes widely.

She delivered a furious tirade, "Of course she can't! That kind of thing will kill the image of Otakus and interfere with the mission of the Clotaku Club! Do you know how much effort I put into repairing the reputation of Otakus after all the things she pulled off in middle school?!"

Yeonji appeared to have a deep-rooted hatred for the girl. Perhaps she was overreacting, considering we were all the same Otaku species.

"Same species my ass! She's my enemy! My enemy!"

Her hate seemed to extend beyond the rules of nature, then.

After a series of grunts and mumbling, Yeonji spoke again, "I'm not saying that all Pubtakus are evil. I already know there's a bunch of Otakus who aren't afraid of being noticed. If you just look a little, you'll find plenty of them around."

"Really? I couldn't tell at all myself."

Without emanating the Otaku aura like that Yerin girl did, anyway.

Yeonji explained, crossing her arms, "You can look out for them during the national history class. Kids who laugh at the 1920's 'Doujinshi' of the writer's society, those

who giggle at 'Great scholar'¹ Yulgok Yi I, those who chuckle at the Korean prophecy of 'the Eighteen's Succession to the Throne'², they're all Otakus. I guarantee it."

I was again amazed that she was extremely knowledgeable in Korean History... Though, the last joke wasn't really relevant.

"However!" shouted Yeonji, flaunting her Otaku detection methods(?), "That girl doesn't stop there! If other Pubtakus are a threat, then she's a global emergency! I appreciate our Otaku culture just the same, but disrespecting coexistence with others and damaging the image of Otakus over a sense of superiority is unacceptable. She might think it's fine to do everything she does, but it's outright crazy to everyone else."

"Nngh..."

I groaned. Otaku's sense of superiority... it was a real thing. It's best explained as the behavior of Otakus where they are overly engrossed in the Japanese subculture, so much that they believe that other cultures are inferior. Of course, such behavior was directly opposing the meaning of being a Clotaku.

"I also heard that she forces classmates to cosplay, or even force them to read visual novels until they appreciate it. The school's staff is quiet about it, too, so no words got out. But surely, this is going to be headline news someday."

"Holy... seriously?"

She was indeed insane. At that level, her misdeeds were on a completely different dimension compared to something like 'Hey, try this book out, it's pretty good!'.

Only when we call it they are 'visual novels'. In the eyes of the common folk, they were usually seen as 'porn'. To force non-Otaku classmates to play such games was to plummet any tolerance this school had for the Otakus.

And one more thing,

"That Eun Yerin girl... who exactly is she? How can the school be quiet about her? Wouldn't she be expelled right away?"

¹ Hanja/Kanji for 'great scholar' is spoken the same way as a term for 'large breasts' that is most likely derived from the Otaku culture.

² Hanja/Kanji for a segment of the full word is spoken the same way as 'masturbation'.

It was a question lingering in my mind before, and so I asked. How could Eun Yerin get away with such behavior?

Though our school may not have strict rules, anything that would affect the academic pursuit of its students was absolutely forbidden.

Undoubtedly, forcing students to read visual novels or do cosplays would ruin a studying environment, so the school must have done something by now. Why did the school leave the girl alone?

Yeonji answered, pouting and sticking her lips out like a woodpecker.

"Why? Because her grandfather is the CEO of the Eunsung Corporation."

"... Really?!"

I was astonished.

"No, really. Her father is the chairman of Eunsung Electronics, and his brother is the director of this school. Everyone, including the principal, reports to her family. No one can stop the girl from doing whatever she likes. How can they?"

"Wow..." I exclaimed.

The surprise did not come from knowing that the granddaughter of the CEO attended this same school, but because such a person is an Otaku.

I mean, really, it's not like skilled, smart, or rich people can't be Otakus, but it's still a big surprise that the granddaughter of the man who owns the nation's largest mega-corporation is an Otaku-- as if she was a fictional character from a game.

I felt my mind blank while trying taking in this new information that was as unrealistic as winning the lottery.

"If that's true... I guess the school can't do much."

If there was one way for us to do anything, it could be the 'I'm gonna tell your grandfather!' But even that wasn't simple. Listening to her history, Eun Yerin's Otaku power level was clearly beyond repair, and all of the school's staff who let her act that way would incur the wrath of Eunsung.

Another possibility was that, considering the degree of Yerin's maliciousness (if those terrifying stories were true) then that behavior might be of something from her entire family.

Either way, the issue was too volatile to solve from our level.

"Oh, wow, all of this is a huge surprise. I haven't heard of anything more shocking this year... How come I never found out about this before?"

"Maybe your home room is too far away. Her coverage wasn't all that big, area-wise."

That made sense. There were a lot of classrooms back at the middle school, too. If my home classroom was indeed too far away, it wasn't strange for someone like me, a transfer student in the final year of middle school, to have never heard of her.

"...Hmm."

Eunsung Corporation's future inheritor... It was a position that could be called the royal blood of the 21st century. The way she spoke did not seem so strange anymore after learning about her identity.

--'Have you lost your mind after gazing at my beauty? You should know your place, peasant.'

... ..Okay, never mind! My limbs are still tingly thinking about that. She's insane, no question.

My body shook when I remembered the events during lunch. While I was still recovering from the thought, Yeonji began to speak with a conflicted expression.

"Hmph, it'll only make you feel bad if you keep talking about her. So, let's play a game of Word Chain³."

"...Word Chain, suddenly?"

³ The Korean language has each letter separated syllable-wise; this causes the word chain to be based on the ending syllable of each word. See also the Japanese variant called [Shiritori](#).

"Otaku Word Chain."

"Otaku Word Chain?!"

That was the first time I heard of it!

"Otaku Word Chain is... as the name says, you're only allowed to use words that are from the Otaku culture. The rules are the same as the original game, but you can always add house rules." The nurse replied kindly from her seat. Wait, she knows what the game is, too?!

"Hmph, the Otaku Word Chain game is already an established past time of the Otakus. When you see two Otakus meet, you can often find them playing the game... as often as you'd see Hailey's Comet."

"That's once every seventy-six years-! No one's playing it, then!"

"In addition, it's said that the Otaku Word Chain was conceived in the fourth or fifth century."

"That's the age of Geunchogo of Baekje!"

"That time was when the Seven-Branched Sword was given to Japan as a gift. No doubt, the Japanese Otaku culture drifted to Korea with that. It was an exchange of cultures."

"Korea clearly lost out on that exchange!"

"Alright, so the main rules of the Otaku Word Chain are..."

She began the game as she pleased, my pleas unheard. As I struggled to follow Yeonji's pace in the conversation, she energetically began her exposition.

"There is only one premise! Use Otaku words to play the Word Chain. Other than that, if you use an unrelated word, you have to explain why it might be related. If you can't do so, or the explanation isn't good enough, then you lose."

"Sounds like public humiliation..."

My face reddened, imagining myself saying 'Oh, the reason why this word is an Otaku word is...'. No, definitely not red because I'm excited.

"And depending on where you are, there may be rules like '2 to 5 syllables only', 'multiple-of-eighteen-sexual-term', and so on! However, the most widely used rule is the 'unique subject pool' rule."

"I'm extremely bothered by that 'multiple-of-eighteen' rule!"

Where and why would people use that sort of rule?! Yeonji, however, coolly ignored my objection and continued, "To explain this 'unique subject pool' rule, whenever a word gets mentioned, if that word belongs to a particular work, then no word from that same work can get used. For example, if someone was to mention 'Ha[]hi', then whatever happens, no one can mention any work from 'Melancholy-stricken Suzumiya Ha[]hi-san.' No Na[]to, no Mi[]ru."

"That's a pretty tough rule..."

With that rule, the available pool of words would dramatically decrease with each turn. In addition, you would have to focus on the mistakes of other players, so the game demanded great concentration and care.

"Well, as a variation, there's the 'extended unique pool' rule where you can't use the names of the related animation company or their other anime, and the 'hyper-extended unique pool' rule where you can't use the voice actors or the original author's other works, but those rules are reserved for the real pros... and so we stick with the unique pool rule."

"...Ahh, okay."

The world of Otaku was still mostly shrouded in mystery.

"Then let's start right now! Give me a word!"

Just as I began to nod from her explanation, she urged me to begin the game. Yeonji's eyes were beaming with competitive spirit, and so I gave in and started the game by giving the first name I could remember.

"Uh... Fate/[]'s 'Lancer'?"

"Certain Magical []dex!"

...She just eliminated a dozen words that I could have used!

With the 'unique subject' rule in place, I could not use any more words from that franchise. I kept that in mind and continued.

"Excel []ga."

"Ga-[][] Zero!"

"Ofuro."

"Urobu[][] Gen!"

"Gen... Gendou. Do I have to say the full name of the character every time?"

"No, you don't have to. But, which Gendou are you talking about? If the name is common, you gotta mention what the character is from."

"...Evan[]lion's Ika[] Gendou."

"Alright. Hmm... Do-... Do-... Dojikko."

"Kouga [][]pou Chou Basilisk-."

Like so, we continued to exchange various names and terminologies. The game was pretty easy near the beginning, but it became progressively difficult as the number of usable words decreased.

Yeonji, that jerk, kept using words from the largest franchises, so I found myself spending a very long time each turn to find a word.

"Heh, did I just hear someone saying that he's quitting? Give me a term that starts with 'Sh-!'"

Shut up, seriously.

"Sh- ... sh-... Hmm..."

It was not easy finding the right word; whenever I got close to finding one, it was from a franchise that had already been mentioned. Not only that, I began to forget which franchises were already mentioned and removed from the game... My head began to hurt.

"...'Sister complex'⁴."

Those words should have been my brilliant comeback, yet I felt dreary saying them. Am I really reduced to using these kinds of words?

I sighed in relief for managing to survive another turn. Unfortunately, Yeonji had an evil grin slowly forming on her face.

"Fufufu, you ended with a '-ssu' for the first time in this game!"

"Wh- what's the deal...?"

I felt an escalating sense of foreboding.

"Fufufu-- digging your own grave like that. I will take your worthless life! Eat this, 'Ssuro-giganteni-paraskulssu---!'

"..."

What the hell was that? That doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard in my life! ...But what's the big deal, when I can counter it with another term that starts with 'ssu'?

"Okay, uh... Ssu--..."

"You're wasting your time thinking! The game's already over. I won!"

"...Huh?"

What are you talking about?!

To my confusion, Yeonji had already struck a victory pose and smiled excitedly. She made the most childish expression I have ever seen and laughed, "Nyu-hee-hee! Sorry, but the last title I said is the Otaku Word Chain's game finisher. Whenever that name is mentioned in a game, the game is done right there."

"What kind of rule is that?!" I objected immediately.

Yeonji replied with the most punchable face, "It's this rule right here! 'Ssuro-Giganteni-Paraskulssu' is the name of the last boss from an amazingly obscure

⁴ 'Shisuta Compuleksu'.

game called 'Ssuro-gigan Last Vampire.' In the setting, the full name is 'Ssuro-Giganteni-Paraskulssu-[] [] () () ()'!"

Yeonji showed me a paper containing various, indecipherable symbols.

"In the setting, the final six letters of the name are actually written in the language of the demons. No humans can say or hear that part! So, if you say that name, then you automatically win!"

"Aren't you a human, too--?!"

Top story: Earlier today, Miss Seo Yeonji (age 17) proclaimed that she is able to speak the language of the demons. In the wake of this new development, her comment was the following: "Heh, how rude! I clearly said the '[] [] () () ()' at the end of the word. Of course, a human wouldn't be able to hear it... how unfortunate."

"You're a huumaaan tooooo---!"

Even if I have no evidence to disprove that she's a demon!

"So, anyway, it looks like it's my victory! Fufufu, looks like you've reached the limits of your small potential."

"Don't get cocky over winning against a beginner-!"

This is one defeat I will never accept, Seo Yeonji! Just you wait.

I ground my teeth in spite.

The nurse gave us the look of a shepard watching sheep play on a meadow. Then she gave an advice, "That's alright, Injin. Next time, don't say anything that ends with 'ssu-'"

"That word, you knew about it too?!"

Am I the only one who hasn't heard of it?!

"It's pretty famous, you know. For being the Otaku Word Chain's undefeated move."

Didn't someone mention that Ssuro-whatever is an extremely obscure game...? The developers would probably be sad about their game being famous in an unintended way.

As I began to feel sympathetic for the developers of the 'Ssuro-gigan Last Vampire', the nurse continued to speak in her relaxed way.

"Well... It's normally in a chat room or a blog where they play the Otaku Word Chain, so no one can do anything when you write '[][][]()()()'. Eventually, it got remembered as the uncontested victory word, so people started to use it outside of writing, too. You should remember that."

"Ugh...."

That 'Ssuro-', uh... whatever it was, from what the nurse said, it seemed to be the real deal amongst the Otaku Word Chain player base rather than one of Yeonji's random shenanigans.

I'd bet that it was discovered solely for the sake of having an invincible move.

There was only one defense: don't end the turn with something that ends with 'ssu-'.

No need to think about anything else, you just had to use it and win. It was more of a fun trivia for the game than a cheat, so it was something you couldn't question and go 'Why does this even exist?!' ...But why not tell me about that secret move beforehand, instead of saying useless jabber like the 'multiple-of-eighteen' rule and other crap?

I sighed, unable to object. A real man should never complain about the world being unfair to him, but instead he should contain the anger and vow for revenge.

While I quietly made plans to start learning Otaku-related terms as soon as I get home, Yeonji jeered, "Now then, since you lost this time, buy me some topokki!"

"How can you treat a beginner like this?!"

And so, the day at the club ended in tragedy and learning an incredibly odd party game.

As an aside, Yeonji seemed to be giving me strange looks on our way out...

...Probably nothing, though.

* * *

The next day,

My classes had ended earlier, thanks to the shorter schedule on Tuesdays. I had been mucking about uselessly in the meantime, wondering to myself if there would be any consequences from Yeonji if I attended the club later than usual.

'There's going to be an intramural soccer game with Class 3 today... Maybe it's not too late to join.'

Back when the news of the soccer match was going around, I was still busy running errands for Yeonji. To this moment, I regret that I hastily declined the offer to join the match because I wasn't sure if I would have any free time today. Adding salt to that wound, most of my free time had been wasted hanging around with Yeonji rather than it being spent on any of my hobbies.

If I don't occasionally hang out with my classmates -- playing sports or going to karaoke with them or whatever -- I would forever bear the label of being the most boring guy in the class. Then they would reach the next natural question and go, 'Hey, what does that guy do in his free time?' And then my quiet life would be in danger.

...On that note, how does Yeonji act outside of the club? Being a Clotaku isn't simply about not letting others take notice of your hobbies; it's more about presenting yourself as someone who doesn't have those hobbies in the first place. To understand and perfectly blend in with those outside of the Otaku culture is the main goal of being a Clotaku.

...But it doesn't exactly make me proud that I believe something like that. Nevertheless, it led me to ponder about how Yeonji was doing in her class; the way she regularly talks like an Otaku, it's hard to not worry about her daily school life.

Now I'm getting really curious, I thought. Hopefully I'll have a chance to find out in the future, though she never told me her class number before.

...

Somehow, deciding whether or not I should join the soccer match led to thinking about Yeonji. I emptied my mind with a violent shake of my head, and refocused on deciding my next destination between the club and the playing field.

One hour couldn't hurt, I decided. Someone else could take over my spot if I had to leave. Even Yeonji shouldn't get too mad at an hour's delay. I'd always been thinking that I haven't been getting enough exercise lately, too.

With that decision, I turned around and began walking--

Bump

--into somebody.

"Ah, s-sorry, are you alright?" I apologized. I had carelessly collided into someone while my mind was at a blank state. I hadn't heard her approach at all; I must have been completely out of it at the time.

"...I am fine."

That 'someone' was an unfamiliar girl, with immaculately straightened, red-tinted brown hair that was almost touching her shoulders, and her olive-brown eyes complemented by her noticeably long eyelashes. She was not particularly tall, but enough to be slightly intimidating.

There was a certain, stern atmosphere to her, as if I could relax and go to her for any problems I might have in life, despite being the opposite gender as I. She was a strange girl.

On her chest below her emotionless face was a white name card-- which meant she was a third year student in this school.

'Aw, crap, she's an upperclassman!'

The magnitude of my sorry feeling doubled at that instant.

"S-sorry, Sunbae⁵. I wasn't paying attention and--."

⁵ 'Sunbae': Identical usage to 'senpai' in this situation; the word is used to refer to an upperclassman here.

"...I am fine," she repeated, her tone resembling a robot's. I was in pain from that collision myself, yet her voice showed no sign of surprise. "I tend to walk without making any sound. It is not your fault, Mister Injin."

...Mister Injin...?

Weird honorific aside, she called me by my name just there, right?

"Do you... know me?"

"..."

Her only reply was a silent stare. An awkward moment passed, leaving me in confusion.

"...How complicated," she muttered.

What's so complicated? If she was referring to the situation she'd created, then sure, it was complicated.

Silence proceeded again, with Sunbae looking like she was attempting to solve the world's greatest mystery. I twiddled my thumbs and stood around for the lack of better things to do.

"...I understand. Mister Injin, if you do not mind, can you turn around for a moment?"

"...Huh?"

I was taken aback at that request. I wasn't sure how I'd respond.

"It is important for you, too. I beg of you."

"Y-you don't have to beg... L-like this?"

I had no idea why she had asked me to turn around, but I also wasn't too sure about saying "no" to a sunbae who was that insistent. It wasn't exactly difficult to do, anyway.

I turned around and faced away from Sunbae. Then,

"Thank you. Now..."

POW!

"Hurkgh..."

An unexpected, brutish force struck down the back of my neck as soon as I turned around.

Oh... What would be the best way to put it? I'd say... the closest description would be an extremely dull guillotine blade that made an attempt to slice through the skin of my neck.

With the aforementioned force registered to my neck, I squeaked out a constricted cry of pain.

"Ow... Nnng... ...?"

Frightened, I sluggishly turned my body around. There was the sunbae, holding up a blunt blade that was the side of her hand.

"...How complicated."

"W-wait..."

POW!

"AARGH!"

Another merciless chop cut through the air, digging into the side of my neck that was exposed from turning around. I felt like I could die.

"Wh-why... ACK!"

"...How complicated. I am terribly sorry."

"N-no, what are you... Waagh..."

"...Quite complicated."

What's so complicated?!

My consciousness finally began to fade out in pain, my questions still echoing in my head.

...

...

...

How long was I out?

Just as I felt my mind return, my drowsiness was immediately chased away by a relentless flood of pain in my neck.

"Ow..."

The pain was exponentially worse than waking up in the morning after having slept with my neck twisted one way. Even the simple act of breathing sent a periodic, tidal wave of pain down the back of my neck. Attempting to turn my neck was considerably, unimaginably worse.

My hand jumped and reached for my neck in response, but the effort was fruitless as my hands were tightly held behind my back.

Out of the corners of my eyes, I could see duct tape plastered over my four limbs, constricting me to a wooden chair... Basically, I looked like I was in the most generic hostage scene ever.

...How did this happen? I've never had the displeasure of getting knocked out in my life, but lately, every single day had been giving me a reason to lose consciousness.

The first time was when the nurse gave me that drug, of course; back then, I'd felt like I was in the most life-threatening situation that I could possibly be in. I hoped for my life that this situation wasn't the same deal, if not worse.

I dug through my memory to find any evidence that might help me understand how I got here, but there was none to be found. Not a big surprise, though, considering how my very last memory involved a stranger beating me up out of the blue.

'What is this place?'

I glanced around the area, so quickly that I could hear my eyes roll in their sockets. I couldn't move my neck without feeling like it would snap off, so my eyes had to take on the full workload of looking around.

The first thing I saw was... a colossal display cabinet, lined with anime PVC figures on every row.

"..."

...'Wait, what? I don't remember seeing any figures in the boxes that Yeonji brought over. But there's no other place in this school where I'd be seeing something like this, so maybe... Yeonji already expected that I'd be slacking off, so she hired a senior student? ...No way.

So, where am I? Not my school? It looks like some sort of a classroom, but I don't recall there being a classroom like this in Eunsung!

Then I caught a voice, slipping through my panicked mind, coming from a direction that I couldn't see.

"...is the end of it," said a familiar voice, "I finally completed this route. To bring tears to my eyes like this-- this is the most brilliant game I have ever played. The music that played during the ending... it was quite moving. Sniff."

Another voice, just as familiar, agreed with the first, "Yes, the company made a fine choice in hiring this music director. The way there was appropriate music for every situation, combined with high quality art, it has a fantastic overall presentation."

"Hm... It was indeed a wise decision to take your advice to play this game! I believe I will continue seeking your advice in the future."

"...I am honored, Madame."

Their surreal dialogue continued for a fair length of time, then it stopped abruptly, followed with a snuffle.

"In any case, is that peasant still deep in slumber?"

"...Yes. I believe I have overdone it. As I've found, it is not all too easy to knock a man out by simple physical trauma to his neck. I believe I took thirteen tries to succeed."

With that kind of monstrous strength, I'm sure it doesn't matter where you hit thirteen times, I'd be knocked out anyway! And when you said something was 'difficult', you were talking about knocking me out?!

I was then sure enough that one of the two was the sunbae who had knocked me out. Their dialogue continued.

"No matter. However, I am not pleased that I have to wait because of your mistake. Could you bring him here in a more delicate way next time?"

"...Did you not instruct me to 'knock him out and bring him here', Madame?"

"I am quite sure that I had said 'bring him here even if it means knocking him out'... I never meant for you to bring him unconscious at all costs. You seem to do this every now and then."

"...I apologize, Madame."

"Darjeeling tea, Madame."

Followed by sunbae's extremely unapologetic voice was another voice that I hadn't heard before. It was hard to tell by voice if it was a boy or a girl.

"Thank you. Miss Sukyong, Mister Yujin, would you care to join me for tea?"

"...It will be my honor."

"Thank you, Madame."

Their conversation promptly stopped with their polite replies. Then I heard the trickling of a small stream of water, twice or so.

I wasn't sure if it was a good thing that their conversation ended early. I felt my entire body shrivel up from their dialogue, so much that I could feel my limbs slip out of the tapes that held me to this chair.

In time, I felt my imploded limbs re-expand to their original size. I returned to being terribly confused as to what my next move should be. My confusion was cut short, however, by the voice of that 'Madame'.

"Good. That is just the right temperature. It is just hot enough to make that peasant squeal and snap awake, no matter how incompetent he is at being awake. Miss Sukyong, why don't you try it out, now that you've mentioned it?"

...What's happening, now?

I was stricken with surprise. I could feel someone getting up and coming closer to me. Unable to contain myself, I quickly yelled, "W-wait! Stop it! I'm awake!"

"...Madame, he says he is awake."

"He may be talking in his sleep. It should be fine to pour it on him anyway. What's your thought, Miss Sukyong?"

"Wait, that's not fine at all!"

Ask me that question, not the person who's doing the pouring!

My neck began hurting again, thanks to my previous outbursts. My face contorted and wrinkled up from the pain.

In front of me, a familiar, blond-haired girl stood, looking down on me. She sneered, "Hmph, how do you feel, Kang... .. What was his name?"

"...Kang Injin, Madame."

"Yes, Kang Injin. Phew-- It is not easy keeping track of some peasant's name."

...Did she forget her pills today or something? She was mildly annoying before, but now she was just pissing me off.

"You... You're Eun Yerin, right?"

The blonde-haired one out of the comedy duo was, without a doubt, the same girl I had met yesterday; the same girl who was also the granddaughter of the C.E.O of Eunsung Corporations, as I've found out from Yeonji. Asking that single question to her took a great deal of effort, having to overcome my fear for Eunsung.

"To speak of my noble name with a lowly peasant's mouth... Do you wish to die?" threatened Yerin, glaring down with her bright, blue eyes.

"...Not at all."

'At this rate, there's going to be a civilian casualty for every class attendance checks,' I mumbled to myself, venting my frustrations.

Yerin further continued her arrogant lecture, "Hmph, I will forgive you this time. In the future, refer to me as 'Lady Yerin', or 'Madame', or 'Mistress Yerin' or 'mistress'. 'Mistress Yerin' is too lengthy, on second thought."

She couldn't bother to make it easy to call her damn name.

Leaving me helplessly distraught, Yerin calmly brushed her golden hair over with her hand.

"Miss Sukyong, bring the chair over."

A big... an unnecessarily big chair was placed in front of me, on which Eun Yerin sat like a single feather floating gently down. Two more people appeared and stood around the chair as if to guard her.

"Wha-!"

Noticing who the two were, I sharply inhaled. One of the two people who stood next to Yerin was indeed the same third-year sunbae from before, but-- how should I say this-- her overall image looked vastly different than before, as if I were looking at an alteration, no, a mockery of the original.

Simply said, she was in a French maid outfit.

On her head was a white, frilly headband, her black dress padded around her shoulders, its front obscured by a frilly apron-- all details that made her outfit an unmistakable maid outfit. Her shoulder-length hair was tied back into a ponytail, and even her leather boots were strangely but perfectly complementing sunbae's looks.

Seeing a maid-- I mean, seeing a girl in a maid's outfit is already quite the experience, but seeing it here in South Korea, in a school in the middle of Seoul?

And beside her was a... boy... in a butler's outfit. Contrasting the maid with an emotionless face, he -- or she, whichever was the person -- was smiling brightly in an outfit resembling a tuxedo.

If he's a boy, he could be called a Bishonen. If she's a girl, she could be called a Bishojo. Either way, the ambiguity made me slightly uncomfortable.

An emotionless maid and a cheerful butler.

With two art show display escapees by her side, Eun Yerin sat with her legs crossed, staring. My focus helplessly wavered at the sight of her plump, white thighs moving about.

Yerin began speaking in (futile attempts to make) an elegant, dramatic tone, "I am sure you have much to ask."

"Uh... yeah."

My starting question was about this blatant kidnapping happening in this law-fearing land. Why not let me talk without having to do all this?

"No, that won't do. You're my important witness. I cannot let you go that easily," mocked Yerin. What am I a witness for? The number of questions I wanted to ask grew exponentially every second. "Firstly... right. Do you not want to know what this place is? I am sure you are curious what this place is, after being brought here in such a manner."

At least she wasn't utterly oblivious of the fact that I was brought here by force. Since she seemed eager to be asked that question, I complied. "Okay, where is this place?"

"Fufufu-, good question. This is my 'Moe Research Club', also known as 'MoeRe!'"

...Wow.

Even if you sound so proud of yourself when you say that, I can't really share that sentiment when the name of the club is the most mind-numbing, embarrassing name ever.



I remember Yeonji saying that she had 'some weird club' back when she described Yerin, so I suppose that was the Moe Research Club. What the hell do they 'research' around here?!

Clearly not minding my pained grunts from my limbs curling inward once more, Yerin looked around the room, the 'MoeRe', with nostalgic eyes.

"Phew... Yes, MoeRe, the club that I have created and managed ever since the start of middle school... Looking back, I had many memories with this club. I was very happy when this club was officially recognized and given this club room."

Wait, they let this club become official? With this name?!

"Well, I do very much regret that our club's name could not be on the school's website, all because of the principal kneeling down and begging me to not do so. However, I have no doubts that I lived my life to the fullest in the past three years."

...This is my first time feeling sorry for the principal.

And, judging from what she had said, it seemed that I was in Eunsung Middle School. I did have a feeling that the buildings seemed familiar yet new at the same time.

"However," muttered Yerin, looking teary-eyed, "Even I cannot continue using a middle school classroom, when I am a high school student now. Unfortunately, this is no longer a place we can use."

"...You're using it just fine, if you ask me."

Used for torture and kidnapping of a high school student, I must add.

"B-be quiet! Hmph. We are already in the process of transitioning our MoeRe to the high school. Until then, this room can remain as it is!" roared Yerin, raising her eyebrows. Really, she thinks the world revolves around her. "Nonetheless, I brought you here to demand 'that' from you!"

"What do you mean, 'that'?" I asked, confused.

Yerin cast a cold, disapproving glance with her blue eyes. She shouted, "I have already told you, we are moving our old club to a new place within the high school! You ignorant peasant!"

"What about it...?"

I don't care if you find a room or rob it from someone, I'm quite sure someone like you could take the principal's room like Yeonji wanted to! Have fun with that 82-inch flat-screen television or something. Why is this 'MoeRe' stuff related to me at all?

Yerin answered shakily, "Because... The room I wanted as my new club room was the infirmary!"

"Tsk..."

I felt my heart sink. You mean, Yeonji wasn't the only crazy one who thinks the infirmary is an amazing place for a club?!

"I have already seen the little back room in the infirmary. Its size is not to my liking, but that can be forgiven."

Forgive who, now?

In the midst of indulging in her own words, Yerin suddenly furrowed her brows.

"But there is a problem! The owner of the infirmary, that nurse, would not accept my official request to use the room! I clearly followed correct procedures, forms, and rules!"

It sounded like she handed in her request right after our Clotaku Club was established. Although, considering that lazy nurse, it wouldn't be a surprise if she denied it regardless of the order.

As I nodded to myself in silence, Yerin continued wailing, "The only reason she gave me was that 'the room is in use by someone else'... How dare she deny me so without giving me a proper reason! This cannot stand!"

The nurse was probably troubled, too. She couldn't exactly tell her 'this room is owned by the Clotaku Club'.

...Oh. Then, the reason she kidnapped me is... because she found out about the Clotaku Club?!

Sweat began to drop from my forehead.

I was dealing with someone who isn't afraid to knock out and kidnap someone who she had met for less than a day. It should be an easy task for her to ask around in the meantime and find out everything about the Clotaku Club. Not to mention how suspicious she became the last time we've met.

B-but what's the point of kidnapping me, then? What is she going to get out of interrogating me?

Seeing the nervous expression on my face, Yerin mocked, "Heh... It seems you now realize why you are here. Yes, it was my second time requesting the nurse when I met you there."

"Oh no..."

My heart began racing.

"Yesterday, you were most certainly hiding something underneath the bed sheet. As if... it was something that you absolutely could not show me."

I knew I had been found out! Damn, I looked way too obvious, didn't I?

My face reddened in embarrassment, causing Yerin to gain more confidence in her words.

"And after school, Miss Sukyong reported in that you walked out of the infirmary with a little girl. Fufu, you never thought you were being watched, yes?"

"Erk!"

Was that why I had a strange feeling on my back when I went home?

Every word that Yerin spoke pushed me closer to the edge of a cliff. Sweat dripped down my face rapidly.

Yerin continued, now in a more serious tone, "You were hiding something when we first met. Then there was a little girl accompanying you out of the infirmary,

and then the fact that the nurse would not hand over the room... With these three facts, I have reached a single conclusion!"

"*Gulp*..."

Sh-she's surprisingly smart! I can't believe she managed to figure out the existence of our club from just that... I guess she's still a student of Eunsung, even if she's a bit crazy!

This was to be expected of Eunsung Corporation's--

"Yes, Kang Injin! I know that you are using the infirmary as a place for indecent, sexual relationships!"

-- complete idiot.

"Whaaat thee heeeelll aaarree youu saaaayiiiing---?!!"

I screamed with all my might in the face of a complete logical failure. Yerin briefly looked bewildered by my outburst, but quickly regained her composure.

"You are denying it? Do not think you can lie your way out of this one. Yesterday, was it not the naked body of that little girl in the bed with you?"

"You jumped the gun so far, I don't even know what to say to that!"

Even if she's right about Yeonji being small enough! All I was hiding was just a bunch of Otaku goodies! Problem is, I can't say that, either!

With my brain unable to form another word, I remained quiet. Yerin shot a contemptuous glare in response.

"Hmph... You appear to have been dumbfounded by my perfect logic! I was suspicious since you were breathing like a beast on that bed... but to think you were actually committing such lewd misdeeds!"

Breathing like a beast?! I was just scared that I'd be found out that I'm an Otaku!

"I do not know what kind of relationship you have with the nurse, but I will not allow you to continue using the infirmary for such dirty, indecent acts! If you do not leave the infirmary and hand over the club room, I will report your actions to

the school board."

A bloodbath would be inevitable if I don't hand the club room over... seemed to be the gist.

Whether or not I've ever done anything lewd with Yeonji, the severity of this situation was going to get amazingly complex if she were to report us to the student council. On top of that, as a relative to the director of this school, she could easily blame us for anything she could think of.

From what she said, she must have been firmly believing that Yeonji and I were all this and that. To dissolve that nonsense...

...I'd have to reveal the Clotaku Club to her--! My thought process did a 360' and ended up straight back in the original problem. The misunderstanding kept the secret of the Clotaku Club, but to reveal the Clotaku Club was the only way to stop the misunderstanding.

Oh, god damn it all to hell, and whatnot.

I felt miserable knowing that there wasn't a single good option that could get me out. Noticing my sorry state, Yerin became extra confident.

"Now, do it! Give your personal agreement to give up the infirmary, in writing! Then I will forgive you just this once!"

I'll go ahead and use the 'Ask the Audience' lifeline... What, I don't have any lifelines left? W-wait, I can't make this decision on my own! It's not going to make any difference if I say that you can have the room, Yeonji isn't even going to flinch at that! She'd just murder everyone in this room before she says yes herself!

It would have been nice to use Yeonji's hot-headed way of negotiating, but nothing in the world is there for you when you need it. I was about to call Yeonji to discuss my next move.

...Except that I don't know her number.

"Hmph! Your secrets have been revealed to me, and you still believe you have a chance? Miss Sukyong, call the student council immediately."

"...Yes, Madame."

Sunbae, in her maid outfit, pulled out a phone. Wow, that's the newest smartphone from--... I mean, wait! Stop! What are you doing?

"Heh, if you want her to stop, I'm sure you have something to tell us first!"

"Just sssttttttooooooppp-!! I'll explain everything!"

I ended up explaining everything.

* * *

Soon,

After giving up and telling her about the existence of Clotaku Club, Yerin became furious.

"I cannot believe it! This is a challenge to our name!"

It's not.

"Our three-year-old tradition called 'MoeRe' is still alive and well, and these impudent peasants create their own club? And they called it 'Clotaku Club'? This is an obvious attack on my honor!"

It's really not, I'm telling you! Do you really think we're so bored that all we do for fun is try to bring you down?!

Sadly, because Yerin was having her fit of rage, my words remained echoing within my head. Yerin chewed on her pink lips in anger as if to rip them out.

"'Clotaku Club', where closeted Otakus meet...? Absolute nonsense! Doing such things while I am still in this school... I... I will destroy that puny club!"

Aw, man... did it really come down to this?

Yerin continued her drama-filled tirade, her arms spread out and raised like a prophet giving a sermon. She was visibly full of energy, as if every strand of her wavy, golden hair was coursing with vigorous spirit. Though unfortunately, that energy was pointed directly at our club.

Also, how did she plan on destroying the club? Was she going to make the principal give some special order, like 'ur all banned, kthxbai'?

"What do you take me for? I do not condone such dirty tactics!" replied Yerin to my question, her feelings hurt. "This school is not big enough for the two of our clubs! You dared to make yourselves the Otaku club of Eunsung High School, so is it not our duty to prove whose club deserves to stay? Through the powers of MoeRe and mine!"

...So what were they doing then? I still had no clue what they were asking for.

"Of course, this calls for..."

"An Otaku showdown!"

The doors to the Moe Research Club burst open.

Continuing Yerin's words with extreme volume, a tiny shadow emerged into the room through the open doors.

"...Seo Yeonji?"

I was stunned.

I mean, yeah, I could have been in a far more terrible spot if Yeonji hadn't joined, but I was still surprised that she showed up here at all. But you could have picked a better time to enter, you know!

"H-hey, how did you get here?"

"By your scent... but seriously," joked Yeonji, after I asked her what Yerin and co. should have, "You took such a long time to get to the club, so I asked around, and I heard there was some boy getting dragged to the middle school by a girl. Considering what we talked about yesterday, I thought you would be here; just about everyone who's been to the middle school knows about this club."

So I've been dragged around the floor, huh...

"Anyway," said Yeonji, facing away from my scrunched-up face and looking at Yerin, "If you want to talk about our Clotaku Club, you talk to me, buddy. The president of the club is me, Seo Yeonji! You got something to say to me?!"

"You? The president of Clotaku Club?"

Yerin cocked her eyes, unwilling to believe her. She probably thought I was the head of the club, seeing how Yeonji doesn't look like the head type of a person.

"Hmph... what a bad joke. The reckless leader of the Clotaku Club who dares to oppose me is a little girl, who's as tall as my thumb! Your name was... Seo Umji⁶?"

"It's Seo Yeonji!" shouted Yeonji.

Yerin brushed her golden hair aside and said, "A peasant's name is not important. ...Nevertheless, it seems I will have to teach you who owns the superior Otaku club."

"Hmph, likewise!"

...Please don't teach anything like that to each other.

The two angrily glared at each other, their heads angled appropriately to compensate for their massive difference in height. Their glares met, one from eyes as blue as a clear lake, and the other from crystal, jet black eyes.

Yeonji muttered, looking like a cat with her fur puffed out, "Even before today, I always knew I would have to confront you sooner or later. It was inevitable anyway, so I'm going to take you down here and now!"

"You're as pitiful as a tiny chick that just burst out of its egg... But lions do their very best even when hunting a fragile rabbit. Sorry, but I will do my best to crush you!"

Hey, hey, hey...

"You two keep talking about bringing each other down... What are you two planning on doing?"

""We'll have an Otaku showdown!""

The two answered at the same time. A moment passed with the two scowling at each other.

⁶ 'Umji' means 'thumb' in Korean.

"Between our Clotaku Club and MoeRe, we'll see which club has the higher power level!"

"This is Eunsung, South Korea's greatest school! Any Otaku club that belongs to this school must have the land's greatest power level! After we decide whose club is the better one, the loser forfeits their life to the winner!"

...Do you guys usually bet your life over something as trivial as this?

I looked to the ceiling and sighed, my body still firmly tied down onto a chair.

Ignoring the two's exchange of hate-filled glares, I asked unenergetically, "About that 'Otaku showdown', how are you two going to compete at all?"

Yeonji and Yerin both answered at the same time again,

""Obviously, it's the Otaku Word Chain!""

Huh, they're surprisingly well coordinated.

8. A Sunday Afternoon

Today's a sunny and bright Sunday.

Okay, sunny or not, the weather wouldn't matter a bit to an 'indoors-type' guy like me. But, if I were to take a quick glance out the window whenever, I'd prefer if there was a ray of sunlight than a dark, cloudy mess. Humans are photosynthetic creatures, didn't you know?

The problem was that I wasn't particularly feeling great, in spite of the amazing weather.

I sighed.

I wasn't feeling down because I was stuck in my room on a beautiful weekend, being watched by my dad as I study-- ...oh, nevermind, that actually is a good reason to be down-- but it was mostly due to the events of yesterday.

Yes, that incident that quickly went downhill.

* * *

""It's the Otaku Word Chain!"" said Yeonji and Yerin in unison, who then resumed exchanging their menacing glares.

"Hah! To choose the Otaku Word Chain, you appear to be quite confident! But I will soon show you that your confidence was mere recklessness!"

"Hmph, just don't be asking me later if we can compete with something else! So, are you bringing those two behind you to make a team of three?" asked Yeonji, pointing at the maid and the butler.

Yerin nodded, "That is correct. But there are only two of you; if you ask nicely, I may scale down my team!"

"Heh! Don't bother, we already have three! We now have three against three playing. Any objections?"

When did we have three people?! Yeonji, you're not thinking about forcing the nurse into this game, are you?

Yeonji and Yerin began discussing the conditions and rules of the game, unimpeded due to silence from everyone else. There wasn't a clean entry for interjections when two of the world's greatest egoists were butting their heads together here.

"The only rule in effect will be the 'unique subject pool' rule! It's fine this way, right?"

"Quite the standard play. Yes, I will accept-- The contest would end too quickly if we use rules that are too complex for lowly peasants, after all!"

"Nyuuuu-t!"

"Hmph!"

I'm surprised you two haven't damaged your eyes yet from glaring at each other all day...

Yeonji broke out of her duel of glares. "Hm. I think we're done setting the rules. How about we start talking about the stakes of this match?"

"Oh, it isn't much; once I win the match, you put an end to your silly little 'Clotaku Club' and take leave from the infirmary. Then our Moe Research Club will rightfully take place."

Her bet was as predicted. Yeonji nodded and agreed, "Yeah, I'll accept. And what if you lose?"

"Hah, surely that will never happen! It is utterly unnecessary to prepare for something that won't happen in the future."

"Nyuuuuu-t!" scowled Yeonji, gritting her teeth. Yerin grinned mischievously as she watched Yeonji wallow in anguish.

"Hmm... If you really need a false hope to grip onto, I will give you one," said Yerin, brushing her golden hair aside, "In the off chance that we lose, we will do anything that you ask of us. So, tell me your conditions."

"Anything we want, huh...?" repeated Yeonji, a dark, evil aura quickly forming around her. Her voice became unnervingly sinister, befitting a demonic echo from the depths of hell. "Is that so... If we win, how about we strip you down and tie

you to the school's front gate?"

"Hah, that's fine by-... What?!"

Yeonji continued her maddened babbling, "Strip you down to the last thread of your clothes... Tied down under a banner that says '100 Won per turn'... Ka-haha, you dirty pig!"

"Stop it! What kind of twisted things are you imagining right now?! What do you mean by '100 won per turn'?!"

"Loose like a used-up rag... All sticky... Dripping..."

"What are you saying?! What is with those uncomfortable descriptions?! Stop it, stop it right now!"

"Well... Okay, I think that'll do for our victory condition."

"I will not accept! Think of something else! Anything else! You could get rid of MoeRe when you win!"

"What?! That kind of crap won't satisfy my newfound inner sadist!"

"H-how can you refer to our MoeRe as 'that kind of crap'?!" cried Yerin, jolting in surprise.

It seemed that Yeonji had discovered something dangerous and twisted within herself. "Yeah... If we win, you should wear a sign that says 'I am an Otaku. I await the nation's judgment' and go around the school with it! Of course, this is while you're still naked."

"Why do you keep going back to that?!"

"And once you're done with that, go straight to the gallows."

"After all that humiliation, I'll be executed?! How can you be so insensitive of human life?! Shut up!"

"Fufufu... Ka-hahaha..."

"Kyaaaaa-! S-stop laughing like that! You're weird! ...H-hey you, that peasant over

there! Do something about this rabid hamster!"

"...Uh, I'm kind of tied up to a chair over here."

Chaos ensued. After a whole lot of things happening in between then and now, it was decided that the winner of the Otaku Word Chain game gets to scrap the loser's club.

* * *

--And that's the full story of what happened yesterday. Now it's easier to understand why I'm feeling so down, right?

In a blink of an eye, I'd been assaulted and kidnapped in the middle of a nice day, and now, all the effort I've poured into starting the Clotaku Club was about to go to waste. Yeonji already mentioned before that 'something like this will happen on its own', but I couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling that this chain of events was started entirely by me.

When we lose the competition tomorrow, will it really be the end of Clotaku Club?

I wanted to believe that everything that had happened so far was a great prank, but Yeonji and Yerin looked like they were very far from joking around. They even signed a binding contract that turned this game into a legal obligation, so there was no way to back out of it now.

It was almost as if our club was a Hardcore Mode character-- or, more appropriately, a Hardcore Club, I guess?

They took the contract one step further and added a silly clause that prevented either side from making another club. There could only be one.

Yeonji aside, what made Yerin think it was a good idea to accept this silly duel? Compared to the week-old Clotaku Club, her MoeRe seems to have a history that goes back to her middle school years. It was obvious how attached she is to her club, but Yerin accepted Yeonji's declaration of war without a moment's hesitation.

Seriously, what the hell is everyone thinking?

I shook my head. It didn't matter if I understood them or not, the duel was going to happen regardless. There was no need to worry my little head over it.

I suppose I should still try my best in the match tomorrow. However, whether we win or lose, if it happens, then it happens. I had no will or reason to be so eager about putting an end to Yerin's club, so I wasn't going to waste my time practicing for the match.

...If practicing would help me pay back all the trouble Yeonji caused in my life recently, then maybe I would.

"...I guess I'll study." I diverted my train of thought. There were probably better things to worry about in my life, especially on a nice Sunday morning.

In times like these, it's best to fill my head with other thoughts. Filling up my head with memorization-heavy courses should clear my head. Korean history or modern history should do nicely.

You might think, "Why is this guy suddenly thinking about studying?" But don't forget that I'm still a student at Eunsung. It might seem that all I really do in school is hang around with Yeonji, but I've always been studying to maintain a decent grade.

When do you ever see anime characters study, other than in one or two episodes? They're all studying when they're not on screen, of course; even if some high school girls who do nothing but eat cake all day get admitted into Ivy League universities, it wouldn't be a strange thing in the context of anime.

"...Damn."

Wait, they were studying when off screen?! What a convenient excuse! My life would be so much simpler that way, if I could go to sleep and know everything when I wake up again.

No big surprise that there's a saying that girls in anime never go to washrooms, or pick their nose, or whatever else. They're humans, too, so they'd do everything they need to do as human beings when they're off screen. Yeonji, for example, spends most of her time having drinks from the club's fridge, so she takes very frequent trips to the washroom-- ...moving on.

So, without being a fictional character, studying is still a big part of my daily life.

Feeling dreadful from the harshness of reality, I pulled out my textbooks from my bag--

--And then I was interrupted by the doorbell.

Every damn time I try to start studying, something like this happens. Oh well, though, life finds its way to be cruel sometimes, sort of like how your parents yell at you to stop being lazy only when you start doing something useful.

Sad life.

I lurched toward the door phone, grumbling all the way. I turned on the camera at the front door, but no one was in sight.

I picked up the door phone and asked if someone was there. "Hello?"

...But there was no reply. Did someone ring the door by mistake?

Just as I was about to turn around and leave,

The doorbell rang again. What the?

The camera still showed no signs of anyone being outside. Confused, I walked to the front door and opened it.

"Is anyone th--"

As soon as the door opened, a small hand abruptly reached through the opening, grabbing my arm.

"Bwaargh!"

What the hell?!

"...It's me."

The mysterious intruder who appeared with nothing but a grumpy voice was... Yeonji. No wonder I couldn't see her from the door's camera!

"S-S-S-S-Seo Yeonji?!"

I was surprised, not just from being reminded of how tiny she is. Yeonji came to

my house, not on a weekday, but on a Sunday!

Why is this so shocking? Because my dad is in the house, since he doesn't have work on Sundays! He's such a conservative old man, as if he came straight from the Chosun era. If he saw that I brought a girl into this house, nothing good can come out of that.

"What's the issue here? You're looking like you don't want me here," Yeonji moped, casting a disappointed glance out of the corner of her eyes. I had to focus on getting out of this situation first.

"Huh? Oh, uh... You're mistaken. S-so, what's happening?"

I almost added at the end, 'Why aren't you home on a Sunday?'.

Yeonji replied cheerfully, straightening up, "It's Sunday! I'm not going to waste it being stuck inside my room. Let's go for a walk!"

...When did I become your dog? You're going to take me out for a walk because you feel like it, is that it?

I was about to start studying, anyway. Unless she wants to see me get kicked out of Eunsung and transfer to a different school, she should leave me be.

"Hmph, why study now? Okay, then we'll study together at your house."

"?!?!?!"

Yeonji continued, grinning like a villain, "I was going to go over tomorrow's match with you, but... if you want to study, then we'll just have to study together. My marks are better than yours, so I'll teach you. Can I come in? Mrs. Kang, it's Yeonji~!"

"W-wait! I'll change and go out right now!"

I can never deal with her.

* * *

And so, I somehow ended up walking around with Yeonji on a Sunday morning.

Going over tomorrow's match, huh? I guess she was getting nervous about it, too. Though, it would be stranger if she didn't care at all that our hard-earned club was in danger.

"Ah, what a nice day~! On a day like this, you really have to enjoy the sun!"

...But this girl, it had been thirty minutes since we had left my house, and there was not a single mention of the match. Instead, she was acting completely out of her Otaku character.

Also, that smiling, happy face... it had absolutely no trace of nervousness.

Something felt wrong.

Whenever Yeonji felt either very content or very angry, something weird happened in my life. I began shaking from the ominous feeling. It didn't help that I wasn't dressed up to deal with this chilly wind of April.

"A-hem!"

Yeonji stopped leading the way and tried to attract my attention. What is it now?

She turned around with an exaggerated movement and put her hands on her waist as if to show off. Both of us fell silent for a while.

"Nya-hem... Um... Hey, Kang Injin, don't I look different today?" asked Yeonji, sounding hopeful.

"Erk... Different?"

Did she... change her hairstyle? Unfortunately for her, I know absolutely nothing about hairstyles. I remember back then, when my mom got her hair permed and I didn't notice it at all-

"Not my hair! My clothes! Clothes!"

Yeonji shouted angrily, waving her fist at me. Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess it was my first time seeing her without the school uniform on. So, uh...

On her hair was a strange ribbon, her pale shoulders and neck exposed above her off-the-shoulder sweater, then a short, checkered skirt below that, and then

finished off with striped stockings covered by platformed shoes.

I inspected Yeonji all around, while her eyes sparkled brightly in eagerness for my response. I smiled forcefully and commented,

"You're not in your school uniform today!"

"That's it?!" screamed Yeonji, filled with despair. "Nyuuuu-t! Seriously? Is that really it? Isn't there anything else you can say?"

Say what else? I had no idea what she wanted me to say. Then... Oh, here's one.

"Uh... You look a little taller?"

"Nyaaaaaaaaahh--!"

...I guess not.

After squawking like a dying rooster, Yeonji dropped her head and sighed, dejected.

Low, droning groans escaped her lips like the cries of deep sea fish from the bottom of the Mariana Trench. "Nyuu... I knew this would happen. I never expected anything from an Otaku who has zero interest in 3D women, but loves those boring 2D girls who wear the same thing every single day... Why did I waste so much time in front of the mirror so early in the morning...?"

"Hey, hey, hey," I interrupted, having interpreted some of her words as insults.

Yeonji raised her head back up, bearing a mysteriously serene expression; her image was that of a smiling Buddha sitting under a linden tree.

"Well, whatever. It doesn't matter now, so go buy me some chicken kebabs."

"How can you say that like it's a natural thing for me to do?!"

It was a good thing that I brought my wallet in case of emergencies like these.



"...Hee hee."

Her energy returned in the very moment she took a bite out of the skewered chicken. She stuffed her face full like a squirrel, and pointed at an empty bench with her free hand.

"Let'sh *munch* shtey here *munch* fer a momenh," she mumbled, her mouth full. I couldn't understand a single word she had said, but she likely wanted to rest on that bench for a bit. I dusted the seat off with my hand and sat with Yeonji.

Hm... the weather's pretty nice.

I looked towards the sky and saw an endless sea of blue, devoid of any clouds. It was like the skies I'd see in generic anime openings.

...It saddens me that the only poetic comparison that I can think of involves anime.

By the time I looked at Yeonji again, she was already down to the last chicken skewer. She sure eats quickly for someone with such a small frame.

"...Yuu don *munch* geh any." She sneered, noticing that I had been staring at her. What a greedy girl.

In the end, she ate everything by herself, down to the last bits of the sauce that got on her fingers. I really was expecting her to share at least one of the skewers. Holy...

Her mouth was almost covered with sauce, which soon disappeared like the rest of the food when she wiped her mouth with her fingers and then sucked the sauce out of them.

I was just about to consider wiping her mouth for her, too. She doesn't realize how this scene is supposed to work out!

"Here, throw this out," demanded Yeonji, passing over the bare wooden skewer. I briefly contemplated on salvaging the last remaining bits of chicken on it, but

quickly decided against it.

After throwing the skewer away in the nearest garbage can, I came back to find Yeonji looking up to the sky like I was doing before.

"What are you doing?"

"Nyu-... I was just thinking, today's sky really looks like an anime opening."

...You thought about that too? We're completely hopeless.

We sat down together and stared at the cloudless sky in relaxing silence... but however poetic that might sound, that's incredibly boring, so I started a conversation with Yeonji instead.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"No, you can't."

Wow.

I glared at her menacingly, but she failed to take notice. With her sight still fixated at the sky, she explained, "It's because I already know. You were going to ask why I decided to have a match with them, right?"

"Erk."

S-she's pretty good.

"I told you already, this is something that would happen eventually." said Yeonji, pouting. "And I don't like her, either. I thought I'd use this chance to put her out of her misery."

"You know, it could be the end for us, instead." I replied. I felt that she needed to be reminded that the match was significant for us, too.

"Of course, when you kill, you also have to prepare to be killed. If I want to destroy her club, I have to risk my own." Yeonji emphasized.

"You... really want to go that far to stop MoeRe or whatever?"

"Yes." replied Yeonji, not even giving a hundredth of a second of thought. "Her group is evil. For all the Otakus trying to survive in this country, and for the new Otaku world I'm trying to make, it's evil. So I'm going to demolish it. I'll remove all traces of it from our school." Yeonji stated boldly, her tone resembling the response of Cold War-era American citizens who were asked about their feeling towards Communism.

If they're evil, are you saying you're on the side of good?! 'Dear Lord, forgive the anime figures up my sleeves'¹, is that it?!

"Whether or not I'm the Mysterious Otaku doesn't matter; they're still evil. As long as they stand in my way, I'll never accomplish my dream. Hmph, whoever tries to stop me will be sliced and quartered."

Such a terrifyingly inappropriate remark did not fit her cute face.

By her standards, it seemed like 'whoever tries to stop her = absolute evil'. For someone who's still in high school, she was well on her way to starting a coup d'état.

Speaking of Yeonji's 'dream'...

I haven't been keeping it in my mind thus far, but what Yeonji declared back then-- that she was reshaping this country to a place where Otakus aren't looked down upon-- she was clearly serious about making it happen.

If she were to achieve that dream, history books in the future would say that tomorrow's match is 'both her first great challenge and her chance to embark upon the world of politics'.

¹ Reference to Kaitou Saint Tail. There are many variations of this line in different English translations, so the reference may be hard to notice.

...Just thinking about that makes my every muscle twitch. I could never keep a straight face when thinking about her goal. What caused her to set such a silly goal? If you keep your Otaku life in secret and let everything be, isn't that enough? Why try to change an entire country?

"...Hmph."

Yeonji muttered to herself in search of a reply. Her quivering pink lips soon unsealed, having found her desired words:

"The reason for this goal is...-"

"Oh, hello, Mister Injin. How are you?"

Interrupting Yeonji was the voice of an expressionless woman, who happened to be Yerin's maid from yesterday-- Sukyong-sunbae.

* * *

"Erk- uh... S-Sukyong-sunbae?"

"...Yes, that is I. This may be late, but I must formally introduce myself. I am Sul Sukyong."

Her sudden appearance left us in disarray. Not mindful of our state, Sukyong-sunbae held the ends of her skirt and curtsayed.

She was wearing neither a maid outfit nor the school uniform, but simple, normal clothes. Defying her casual looks, she could not contain her cold, stern aura from making me curiously uncomfortable.

"And, please feel free to call me Sukyong. You do not have to be polite, sir."

"B-but it's..."

...It's precisely that attitude that's forcing me to speak politely, you know.

Sukyong-sunbae turned around to speak to Yeonji, preceded by another polite bow.

"We have also met before. Is your name 'Seo Umji', perchance?"

"It's Seo Yeonji!" screamed Yeonji.

Sukyong-sunbae clenched her hands in front of her and apologized. "I am sorry. Madame remembers you by 'Seo Umji', so I may have been influenced by her. I will be more careful in the future."

"Nyu-..." groaned Yeonji. She couldn't be happy that someone from Yerin's group was here, especially after a discussion where she wished for the end of all things that had to do with Yerin.

I moved in Yeonji's way after interpreting Yeonji's predatory glare as danger signals.

"By the way, what are you doing here? Is Yerin nearby?" I asked, out of fear that she might really be nearby, in which case I was planning to bolt away in the other direction.

Sukyong-sunbae shook her head. "...No. I only work for six days a week, part time. Madame is at her mansion. I am taking a walk outside to enjoy this sun."

"...Is that so."

What happened to Otakus being shut-ins today?! I sighed.

Sukyong-sunbae narrowed her eyes in contemplation. "That is my reason. What about you, sir and madam? Are you two on a date?"

"No," I denied immediately, afraid of there being a similar misunderstanding to the one Yerin had yesterday. Is it really strange for a boy and a girl to be together without being on a date?

"Nyu-..."

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Yeonji crying like a kitten with a stomachache.

Sukyong-sunbae stared at us quietly, inspecting my honest-to-god smile and Yeonji. A moment later, she resumed, bearing a blank expression that was curiously different than before. "...Yes, I see. I understand. Then, may I join you two?"

""Wha-?"" Yeonji and I simultaneously responded.

"I asked if I may join you two," repeated Sukyong-sunbae, maintaining an unyieldingly void face that was impossible to decipher, "If you are not on a date, then I am not interrupting anything by joining, yes?"

"Uh, I guess not, but..."

"...If not, are you heading to a place I should not join? Say, a love hotel?"

"W-what are you saying?! Of course not!"

"Then, please excuse me."

Sukyong-sunbae marched towards us, placing herself directly between Yeonji and I. And so, it was quickly decided that Sukyong-sunbae was joining us for a walk.

"Nyyuuuuuuunnnnnn---gggghhh!"

Yeonji gritted her teeth like she had a grudge against her enamels, but there was nothing I could do about this situation. Our walk continued, now in a strange combination of me + Yeonji + Sukyong-sunbae.

After Sukyong-sunbae joined us, the atmosphere grew... fairly awkward.

It wasn't only because of Yeonji's negative disposition towards anyone affiliated with Yerin; my only memories of Sukyong-sunbae involved repeated, painful blows to my neck. On top of that, as her blank face suggests, she was a woman of few words. Having an engaging conversation proved difficult with our group.

The way she stood between Yeonji and I, she felt like a personification of the Berlin Wall.

"Grrrr..."

To make matters worse, Yeonji was getting angrier by the second. I had to speak up quickly and dissolve any negative feelings in this group.

I hesitated for a few moments, and finally worked up the courage to speak: "By the way, Sukyong-sunbae... Why are you still talking that way?"

"...Pardon me, Mister Injin?"

That! Exactly that!

"I mean, you know, talking to us politely like I'm your boss, or, speaking like a maid."

I couldn't really describe it in any other way than 'maid-like'. The 'Madame' isn't here with her, so why is she still talking like she's at her job?

After tilting her head around like a puppy in deep thought, Sukyong-sunbae replied, "You misunderstand. I always speak like this."

"You're kidding!" It's shocking enough to hear someone talk like a maid in this country, so how am I supposed to react if it was never an act?!

Sukyong-sunbae continued nonchalantly, "To tell the truth, my lady's way of speaking is an act. She is fully aware of how she speaks to others."

"Of course! It would be scarier if she wasn't aware!"

"She speaks in a tone more befitting her age when she becomes panicked or when she's alone... and I find that cute. If you ever get the chance to hear it, please do so, Mister Injin."

"I don't need to know that! Wait, why are you revealing sensitive information about your own boss?!"

"However, I am not acting."

Sukyong-sunbae paused in her track, standing still. We turned around, as she lagged behind by a single step by pausing.

"This has always been my way of speech, Mister Injin. Ten years before, perhaps fifteen, I have always been taught and grew up to speak this way."

"Why...?"

"There were three children," said Sukyong-sunbae nonchalantly, "The eldest sister, far older than the other two, and then a little sister and brother. The eldest was an Otaku; perhaps the world's most powerful one."

Oh hell, I don't even want to know what that means.

"She was as bad as... hm. Let's say, she wanted to raise her siblings into character archetypes she enjoyed as soon as they were able to speak. Is that clearer, Mister Injin?"

"...!" I gasped.

"It is as you imagine." Sukyong-sunbae nodded quietly. "The little sister was raised to be an emotionless and expressionless combat-maid, and the little brother was made to be a butler with a permanent, honest smile on his face. The children were raised very closely to the liking of the eldest, and came to resemble characters from animations."

"Nyuu-..."

Yeonji gripped on my shirt tightly. We stared at her, our eyes no doubt filled with disbelief and terror.

"You might not believe me, but I am telling the truth." Her robotic narration continued. "It was fairly easy to learn how to talk in this manner, but I was not sure how to fulfill the 'combat' duty. I learned Tae-Kwon-Do and Taekkyeon; now I am capable of kicking a man's face whilst standing perfectly upright. Would you like me to demonstrate, sir and madam?"

We remained silent. Yeonji's grip of my shirt doubled in strength.

"...And so, we were raised this way," said Sukyong-sunbae, following a momentary pause. Without a slight change in tone or emotion, she continued, "And one day, my sister went bankrupt. She had a lot of debt to her name. She had a decent job, but her salary could not cover the debt. I should have said something when she was on a buying spree while our country's exchange rate was weak..."

...She went bankrupt from buying too many imported Otaku goods?! She's crazy! The terror intensified even further.

Sukyong-sunbae's voice carried no signs of disturbance. "...She escaped out of the country, leaving us to fend for ourselves. The only thing we learned from her was how to live a life of servitude, and thus we were almost forced to do all manner of things to survive..."

...What are these 'all manner of things'? This isn't something that little kids shouldn't hear, I hope.

"Then, we were saved by Lady Yerin."

"Ack!" Yeonji flinched, squeaking like a kitten falling off furniture.

"...Our family and the Eunsung group had a connection. After hearing about our situation, she kindly repaid our debts and hired us. It is thanks to her that we are attending Eunsung at this time."

"R-really..."

I've believed that she was some psychotic, rich girl who extorted her poor fellow

classmates with the promise of money. I was embarrassed.

"Nyu-..."

Yeonji's face became reddened. She must have been thinking the same. However, her expression quickly became cold when she began speaking again. "H-hmph! Beautiful story. So, what are you trying to say? Are you saying that you people have such a heartwarming relationship, so I should go easy on you guys tomorrow? I'll say it now, I'm winning that match."

...Come on. Can't you put a little more effort into reading the mood?

To my surprise, Sukyong-sunbae was unwavering at Yeonji's remark. She replied quietly, "...That is not what I want, but... You hate our mistress because she is the Pubtaku Queen, yes?"

Yeonji flinched. She frowned and replied angrily, "That's right. I don't hate her just because I'm on the other spectrum of Otaku. She simply went too far! Crossed the line! I won't stand for the image of Otakus going to hell thanks to her!"

"...About that," Sukyong-sunbae interrupted softly, "The reason she became what she is now was entirely our fault."

"What-?!"

I lost count of how many times Yeonji was taken by surprise today.

Sukyong-sunbae explained further, her tone faintly distant and nostalgic. "...That is right. The first time she embarked on the path to becoming an Otaku was around the time she was in fifth grade."

"That's too young--!" Yerin was an Otaku prodigy herself.

"...At that time, she was raised with the label of being the granddaughter of Eunsung Group's CEO. She had high expectations and jealousy from those who surround her, but unfortunately she was never the sharpest tool in the shed-- to

put it bluntly, she displayed below-average intelligence."

Below average? Considering how she acted yesterday, it was difficult to imagine that to be true. Though, I guess she acted like an idiot at times.

"She judged the position she was in as the child of the Eunsung Group, and compared that to her academic abilities, and... she must have been quite depressed. It was that time, when one of the employees at the mansion brought a DVD to boost her confidence, titled 'Is Maria-Sama Watching Over Us?!'..."

"Why?!"

What does that have to do with boosting confidence?! Even if that's a great series... but, still!

Sukyong-sunbae answered calmly, "'Is Maria-Sama Watching Over Us?!' is truly the masterpiece among shows about being a proper lady. Through the animation, Madame was able to understand what it means to live the high-society life, and she began her life anew."

That sounds like some terrible sales pitch for a lucky charm. 'With this charm, our client Mister A had all of his problems solved in a single day, and he started a new life!'

"...And around this time, she began to act as the 'proud and haughty, yet intelligent and noble lady' archetype."

"I really hoped that wouldn't be the case..."

What kind of employee managed to convert the employer into an Otaku? Scary.

"Lo and behold, the employee was my big sister all along."

"She caused all of this by herself?!" Not only did she change the lives of her siblings, she exacted the same upon her mistress! Is she some sort of a supervillain? Her 'decent job' was working at the Eunsung mansion?!

"...However, Madame was initially a closeted Otaku. She never flaunted her hobbies outside of her room." That was the most unbelievable part of her entire story. She continued, "The time she began her path as the Pubtaku Queen was... yes, right after my big sister escaped from the country, and Madame saved us and admitted us into Eunsung Middle School."

"That's not a long time at all!"

If she was telling the truth, she became the Queen within merely three years. The horror behind this story was surely unending.

Very briefly, a note of apprehension entered and exited Sukyong-sunbae's blank face. "...Yes. Ultimately, she started on her path precisely because of what happened when we were admitted into the middle school."

"...?"

"Two children were admitted into the school, not by passing the tough entrance exams, but purely through the sheer power of the Eunsung family. They also talked in a manner that was completely foreign to other schoolchildren."

Sukyong-sunbae continued as if she was reading a textbook, "At that time, we were likely the most alien things the school had yet to see. We never had proper education prior to that date, either, so it was impossible for us to get along with other children. We acted differently, and we were Otakus. Soon, we were outcast and became a target for bullying."

It didn't matter at all that Eunsung had the more intelligent children of our population; bullying still happened. One could even say that they may be capable of bullying even better by applying their intelligence.

"Saving us from being bullied was, again, our mistress." Sukyong-sunbae shook her head, a hint of sadness entering her voice. "She was... too young to know any better. She confronted the bullies and defended us, asking what's wrong with being an Otaku."

"..."

Yeonji's hand quivered, shaking my shirt with it. Or, maybe I was the one shaking instead.

"She used her power to create the Moe Research Club, watched anime in the middle of class, wore a wig and tinted contact lenses, and forced classmates to cosplay... I do not agree that what she did was right. She might already know that her actions were poisonous. Nevertheless, that was the root of her evils; thanks to us. And we have crossed the point that we cannot go back."

I knew there was something wrong with her hair and her eyes. I sighed. Sukyong-sunbae firmly shut her mouth as if she felt a bitter aftertaste.

"...The reason I wanted to say this... isn't because I wanted to gain your sympathy before the match. Rather, I wanted you two to win tomorrow."

"Wha-."

Taken by surprise once more, we exclaimed. "Then... you want the Moe Research Club gone?"

"Yes," she nodded. "The club is... the symbol for the kindness and mercy that our lady showed us, but my brother and I do not want her to build any more bad reputation to her name."

Her emotionless face returned, and her voice rang honest and true.

"The club is the result of her three years of effort. We couldn't end it by our hands. No one else could have ever thought about ending it. I am very delighted that there is finally a chance for an end." For a moment, she looked as if she was sighing in relief. "...Perhaps the whole reason she bet her club on this match is also because she wanted someone else to end her current lifestyle."

"..."

We could not find a proper response back. A moment later, Yeonji spoke, still holding onto my sleeves. "Then, what, you're going to work with us and throw the game on purpose?"

"No, not at all."

"No?!"

There was no end to the twists.

Sukyong-sunbae hastily replied to dissolve our confusion. "...I am but a maid. If my mistress gives me an order, then I have to perform it regardless of my personal beliefs-- that is how I was raised. And so she had spoken, 'We will show those peasants what for, and make them both kneel before me! I will make that tiny girl weep and lick my boots!' and so on."

"..."

...It didn't sound like she wants her lifestyle to end.

Hearing Yerin's confident declaration of war, Yeonji scowled, her eyes burning with a predatory light. Sukyong-sunbae glanced at her. "And so, I will not be holding back in any way tomorrow. Whatever my own desires may be, I must still do my very best to bring our Moe Research Club to victory."

"...Man."

What am I supposed to do differently, then?

Yeonji must have been thinking the same. Noticing the expressions on our face that I assume were the same, Sukyong-sunbae assured us calmly. "...Despite that, I wanted you to know this."

"..."

"Please win against us, however much effort we will put into winning, and allow

our lady to drop her façade. This is all I can say for now."

"Nyu--." groaned Yeonji, quietly.

Sukyong-sunbae bowed. "...Whoever wins the match tomorrow, I believe there cannot be another chance for me to tell you of this. So, please forgive me for my rudeness. Oh, and one more thing--." She paused just as she was about to turn around and leave. "--I would like to add, thanks to my big sister's 'education', I am very knowledgeable of the Otaku culture. As far as the Word Chain game goes, I am confident that I will fare very well against any opponent. Also..."

At that moment, Sukyong-sunbae's blank, expressionless eyes lit up pleasantly, as if to smile at Yeonji with her eyes.

"Miss Yeonji, I absolutely love what you are wearing today."

* * *

After Sukyong-sunbae had left,

We sat down on the next bench we could find, and spaced out in silence. There were many people around the park; I looked around aimlessly, seeing women play badminton and kids riding around on their tricycles.

I muttered to myself, "...That story, I wonder if it's real."

Sukyong-sunbae's story was, honestly, too ridiculous to be true. However, her expression was serious and her voice rang true; but, even then, why tell us anything at all?

Was it because she didn't want to keep that secret from us? Or, was it simply a ploy to distract us from focusing on winning the match?

Yeonji answered my thoughts, her eyes still unfocused and staring at nothing in particular. "I think she was telling the truth, probably."

"....Really?"

How unlike her. I thought she would be stubborn and say something like 'Of course it's a trick from them! I'm not going to fall for that!'

"Heh," Yeonji scoffed, "I did find it strange, too. That butler-brother guy, he was in a neighboring class back in middle school. Everyone thought he was a strange person, something about his constant smile bothering people."

I couldn't disagree, since I thought he was pretty strange, too.

"A brother and a sister who grew up to an Otaku's expectations, and a girl who tried to defend them by becoming an Otaku herself... That's just gross. Just hearing about it makes me cringe." Yeonji grumbled.

"I'm pretty sure you don't get to mock that, when you're trying to create a land of Otakus yourself."

"Hmph, that's not the issue here..." Yeonji pouted, and nervously swung her legs underneath the bench from side to side. After a moment of wasting energy with her legs, Yeonji started another conversation. "You know, back then..."

"Hmm?"

"Before the weird maid girl showed up..."

Unfortunately for Sukyong-sunbae, Yeonji had now profiled her as the 'weird maid girl'. You're like this to the nurse, too! Can't you watch yourself a little more when dealing with older people?

Ignoring my judgmental glare, Yeonji continued. "You asked me how I came up with the goal I mentioned."

"Hmm... Yeah, I did." As I remember, it was interrupted thanks to Sukyong-sunbae's sudden appearance. "What about it?"

"It was maybe July of last year... Do you remember the 'War of Otaku Power Levels'?"

"...Um, yes."

The War of Otaku Power Levels.

It all began in the anime board of the country's largest online community, 'DDInside'². One user uploaded a video of himself cosplaying in the streets of Seoul, and it soon gathered the attention of many, receiving hateful comments like 'This is an embarrassment', or 'Don't do that in public', and then came the defense from the Otakus who were against being closeted.

Within hours, the argument spread to every other major Korean websites, dividing the communities into two opposing sides of the discussion; the groups that labeled themselves 'Clotaku' and 'Pubtaku'. The incident grew uncontrollably large, so much that every single Otaku in the country would have heard of it by now.

...In other words, it was the most embarrassing, cringe-worthy time period in Korean history.

Just to add, the Clotaku group seemed to be on the losing side that time. To support their own claim, the Pubtakus created and uploaded numerous videos of themselves cosplaying or acting out scenes from the anime in public, and there was no stopping them. The Clotaku side could not find an effective way to denounce their actions, and so the 'war' ended the way it began; awkwardly.

...Ultimately, the war only made the image of Otakus worse off in the country.

God damn, why did I even remind myself?

As I beat myself up to be rid of my memory of the incident, Yeonji continued. "I was part of the Clotaku group when that happened. Phew... I can't count how

² Reference to 'DCInside'. It is essentially the 2ch/4chan/Reddit of Korea.

many opponents I've cut down with my keyboard."

...A keyboard warrior, huh? Well, I guess it suits your usual image.

Yeonji made a solemn expression like a general leading an army to a battle.

"However, the battle was against us. There were many Otakus pretending online that they had an ounce of courage to display their interests in public, when in reality, they'd rather run away and hide. Plus, I could never find a good way to retort when they ask me why I should be embarrassed of something that I truly enjoy in life."

She briefly looked like she could use a long beard to scratch to aid her thought.

"Worst of all, there weren't many amongst the Clotaku group who were willing to actively resist the Pubtaku. By definition we're supposed to be secretive and quiet, so how many of the Clotaku, do you think, were willing to lead the argument?"

"Yeah..."

Yeonji was special for having a twisted goal behind being a Clotaku.

"The only argument we had was to show the ridicule and hate we get from others... like, we needed to tell real life experience of people who were bullied. However, there wasn't anyone who would reveal such a story. At least on the Internet, no one wants to reveal that they're weak."

"...!"

"However,"

I winced.

"There was one Clotaku who did. One guy."

Cold sweat dripped from my forehead. I nervously shot a quick glance at her; Yeonji's face had yet to change from her solemn expression.

"So he told a story about his time in middle school, when he was bullied by his schoolmates for hanging around with a Pubtaku friend..."

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrgghh!"

I screamed involuntarily.

"Whoa! What's wrong with you?!" exclaimed Yeonji, rebalancing herself after almost falling off the bench in surprise. Sweat continued to drop in volumes from my face.

"N-n-n-nothing! I was sitting for so long, my back was hurting, or something."

"How much did it hurt that you had to scream for your life?! That was most definitely a scream coming from snapping your spine off!"

...How do you know how people scream when they snap their spine?

Yeonji clamored on for a while, upset by my outburst, but the situation safely passed with a few quick excuses. Yeonji resumed, now eyeing me suspiciously. "It was the classic, heartwarming tale of 'I couldn't leave my friend be, since we were best friends since we were young'. However the bullying began, I was thoroughly impressed by his fresh tale of school bullies. So, I saved the text and linked it to every website I went to."

"Dooooon't dooooooooo thaaaaaaaat!!"

I knew it! I knew something was wrong! I deleted that post a minute after I uploaded it because I got too embarrassed, and you just went ahead and spread it all over the Internet?! My darkest past is just an impressive story to you?!

...But I would die of embarrassment if I said that to her. I screamed internally, my body flailing about and steaming. Yeonji looked at me like I had gone mad.

"...Why not? I'm sure OP himself would have wanted to spread the tear-jerking tale. And really, I got a lot of responses from other websites, and most people

sympathized with him, such as 'Imao what a poor bastard LOLLOL'."

"They're mocking him however you see it-! There isn't a single bit of sympathy in that comment!"

"Well, don't forget that DDInside is full of Tsunderes. They probably wrote that in the comments, but silently cried by their lonesome. Tsk tsk, they're not honest people."

"That's pretty terrible in its own way!"

At this rate, I'll be the one who's silently crying by my lonesome! Yeonji sighed, as tears almost welled up from my eyes.

"Well, despite my best efforts, the war went in the favor of the Pubtaku..."

"And the only person who suffered was that writer!"

"His noble sacrifice will always be in our hearts."

"No one died yet! Don't kill off people like that!"

"And that was my reason for starting that goal."

Yeonji concluded, ignoring my objections. "There was only one man back then who dared to reveal his tragic past, but I am sure there are many more who suffered like him in our world. I know that a lot of them have a good reason be disliked, but I confidently doubt every Otaku is like that. I want to save those people. Because..." Yeonji stammered, hesitant. "Because, that's what I thought I had to do when I read his story."

"..."

Yeonji firmly closed her mouth, silent. I could not say anything.

I wanted to tell her that she was utterly ridiculous for having the idea of becoming a modern day savior, but my own embarrassment prevented me from talking further.

...Did she realize that I was the wrote one wrote that post?

Yeonji's expression was overly nonchalant for that to be true. Not that she could have figured out that it was me, when I had posted anonymously.

I wanted to ask her if she knew.

"Hey..."

"I'm going home." As soon as I opened my mouth, her small body bounced off the bench. "It's almost lunchtime, so I'm going to eat at home. I'm hungry."

"... Is that so?"

Where did the chicken skewers from before go? Noticing my upset glare, Yeonji posed with her hands on her hips and grumbled, "What, you got a problem? If you want me to stay with you, you pay for lunch. Conveniently, there's a restaurant right there."

"I'm not going to pay for you!"

My wallet isn't bottomless, you know! I shot down her demand, and Yeonji scoffed in response. "Hmph, how greedy! Anyway, you don't get to study today! Just memorize words you can use tomorrow! If you play poorly tomorrow, I'm going to throw you in an iron maiden. Do your best!"

"Hey, hey, hey..."

Before I could say 'please have mercy', Yeonji was already far, far away. She looked perilously close to falling down and hurting herself by running in those platformed shoes, but she disappeared without an incident.

"And she left..."

I stared at the direction Yeonji left, spacing out.

I sighed. I was disappointed that I could not ask, but I was thankful that I did not ask.

If I managed to ask her, what would she say?

"..."

I stood alone, looking at the cloudless blue sky above me.

I started walking back home. Like Yeonji said, at least I shouldn't be embarrassing myself by playing poorly

9. Otaku Word Chain

On the following Monday,

As if to celebrate the lifting curtains of the upcoming-- uh... the upcoming Otaku Word Chain game between our Clotaku Club and MoeRe, the entire school was in a state of unrest.

...That was a joke.

Aside from the sickly patients of the Monday disease, the school was lively as always. It would be a stranger sight, if not a severe issue of our school, if these bright, young teenagers were emotionally affected by some word game happening in a club.

Amidst this school full of energy, I was alone, tense and afraid. My final class of the day had past, and it was my time to go down to the infirmary and begin the match.

I felt like I was walking into an exam room to take the National Scholastic Ability Test-- the ones on June and September, especially. They're the worst, I heard. I couldn't concentrate-- I couldn't settle down. Every step I took toward the infirmary felt heavy and bothersome. But I couldn't back off now; running was no longer an option.

--And I've always known that, but it was good to remind myself. I approached the infirmary's inner door, and entered the room...

"Oh, my... welcome."

...Then I found the room devoid of people, save for Miss Yu Youngseon. For once, she was not sitting in front of the computer, but instead on the couch, staring at an object on the table in front.

The object was.... a cup of noodles?

"Are you having cup ramen?"

"Yep. Want some?"

"No thanks." I only asked because cup ramen doesn't really fit someone like you!

She did not bother insisting further, instead electing to rub her sleepy eyes. "Oh, I'm so sleepy... I didn't get any sleep yesterday! I used to be perfectly fine with skipping two days' worth of sleep, and now, I can't even stay up for one day since I'm over twenty-five..."

...I could not find a kind, appropriate remark, so I chose to remain quiet.

Moments passed by as the nurse griped about her long-gone youth, then she suddenly turned her attention to me. "...By the way, did you study for your test?"

It's a match, not a test! I replied neutrally, "Oh, uh, sure, somewhat." It was a little embarrassing to proudly proclaim that I had been spending any amount of time memorizing Otaku vocabulary.

The nurse flashed a smile, accentuating the noticeably darker circles beneath her eyes. "'Somewhat', is it...? I'm jealous, I haven't studied much at all. I'm worried! What should I do...?"

"There's always someone like you in every class!" There's always at least one of those kids in class who cry about not studying enough on the day of exams! And, just as I had feared, you're the third member of our team!

"I felt like I was in school again, having to actually study and learn something... I was pretty excited."

"You spent all night trying to memorize words?!"

"You don't memorize words... you understand them."

That just sounds like a line straight out of a shoddy study guide! I looked at her in disbelief, but the nurse paid no heed.

She slowly lifted her arms, moving as though she was sleepwalking, and mixed the dry noodles with the soup in her ramen cup. "Ah... so fragrant. This beautiful smell-- I think I'm in heaven."

"...Miss Yu, are you going to be okay?"

Those are cup noodles, right? Not drugs?

"Hmm? ...I don't know what you're saying~. I'm always like th-- *Chomp*, *slurp*, *slurp*."

"Can you please eat more gently?!"

She's supposed to be a respected nurse! And a beautiful lady! And she's making the soup fly everywhere and leaving stains on her clothes!

"I'm really *slurp* hungry *glug* right *sip* now, so--"

"Don't bother talking! You don't have to reply, so keep eating quietly! Please!"

It's even scarier how your face remains serene and sleepy, while the rest of your body is aggressively attacking those noodles! And Yeonji, too! Why do girls around me always end up eating like a pig?! I don't expect anyone to handle every grain of rice with care, but this is just too much!

I patiently waited. The nurse finished the noodles, drank the remaining soup, and then marked the end of the meal with a relieved sigh, signaling a full stomach. Fortunately, she had no further chance to ruin her image.

"Phew... I can feel my energy come back. Oop, I feel a belch coming up."

"Please, please don't..."

The nurse giggled. She snapped the wooden chopsticks in half, put them in the now-empty cup of noodles, and then threw them away in a garbage bag.

"...You look very nervous," she commented.

"Pardon?"

She grabbed an empty can that had been thrown on the ground by Yeonji yesterday, placing it into the bag with the rest of the garbage. She turned around, "I'm sure it's about the match today... your legs are shaking hard."

"Ah, oh. I see." I must have been shaking without noticing. I became overly aware of my legs, taking manual control over every muscle so that my instincts could not.

The nurse smiled soothingly. "Why is that...? Does it bother you that, whoever wins, someone's club will be gone?"

"Ack." I gave a look asking 'How did you know?'

She laughed. "Hah, kids always give away what they're thinking through their facial expressions. ...And I like that."

Are all adults capable of reading our minds, then? It's true, though, that I can never tell what she's thinking. Not in the 'I don't know what the hell you're thinking' way, I mean.

"..."

'Bother me', huh?

It was more accurate to say that I was being indecisive. Yeonji would be furious if she knew, but... I still hadn't a particular reason to win the match and put an end to MoeRe. Why not? I couldn't answer. It was likely related to the classic question of 'do I really have to?'

A match about putting the lives of school clubs on the line sounds awfully like... something straight out of an anime. This story doesn't belong in my life.

"Well, I'm a closeted Otaku, too." said the nurse, interrupting my soundless sulk. "But I have nothing against people who aren't closeted, either. I don't really care what happens today, but I am still going to try my best."

Fortunately, she had the same mindset that I had about this match. Really, what kind of loser would take this Super Idiot Wars EX seriously? Oh... wait, that's just about everyone else.

...Out of the six people involved in this match, less than half the people are sane? What a cruel world!

"...Although I feel this way, you shouldn't have the same attitude, Injin."

"Why not?!"

--And the nurse turned her back on me! This was my only chance to connect with someone who was being sane for once! And, what's worse, my thought got read again! Is it really that easy to tell what I'm thinking? My hands sprang up instinctively in an attempt to hide my face.

The nurse explained. "Of course it's because Yeonji--... No, forget that, I said nothing. It's because Yerin...."

"I heard you just now! How sleepy do you have to be to confuse those two?!"

"...Tee-hee!"

"Don't act all cutesy! You're an adult, for cripes' sake!"

"A-acting cutesy...?" She briefly looked as though she was crying. "Hmph... Injin, you watch yourself when you're alone. Anyway, about Yerin--"

"You just threatened me! In a voice full of contempt!"

"Stop being too damn loud...! Anyway! I've known Yerin since her middle school years."

"H-how do you know her?"

"She got in a huge fight in the first week of class, then she was sent to the infirmary. That was when I met her."

The nurse sat relaxed, and began recollecting the tale. "I suppose no one was crazy enough to try and hurt the Eunsung CEO's only granddaughter, so she was punching, kicking, and screaming all by herself. She got scratched and bruised everywhere in the process, and she lost her voice; she caused a pretty big trouble for the school. I had a little connection with Eunsung, so I did something like a one-on-one counseling session with her. I'm sure she forgot about it now, though."

"Hm..."

She got in a fight at the start of her middle school year? This sounds familiar...

"...She fought because--" The nurse looked like she would rather be somewhere else. "'She was bullying a classmate just because he's an Otaku!' was the reason."

--'She confronted the bullies and defended us, asking what's wrong with being an Otaku.'

...Damn it, I should have known.

I frowned, remembering the unpleasant past of Sukyong-sunbae and Yerin.

The nurse merely shrugged and continued, "It was around that time when she started to... change. I never had the chance to meet her afterward, but I've always heard of her amazing exploits through rumors. I knew the rumors were real, because..." She murmured quietly, as if she had no audience. "Because she had that look on her face."

"..."

I did not reply. The nurse sat, her eyes distant and unfocused, and then added to her quiet mutter, "Well... I didn't think she'd ruin herself this much, though."

"You never expected her to go this far, did you?!" And you just said she 'ruined herself'! We're all Otakus here, don't be so harsh!

"That girl... She needs to be stopped. Even if it means busting her legs into pieces."

"Why so brutal?!"

"She'll go to waste otherwise." The nurse shrugged. "Yerin is... honestly said, she has great potential. She is capable of directing her own life, and she is kind-hearted enough to endure being a villain for over three years just to help her friends. I think it's a miracle that someone like her is a part of Eunsung's family."

A sudden sense of sadness entered my mind for the fact that being an Otaku was the origin of Yerin's problems.

"We can't let the brilliant granddaughter of Eunsung family cut herself off from society forever. We don't have to stop her from being an Otaku altogether; we just have to put her at a level where she is on friendly terms with everyone again. As a licensed teacher, that's all I can wish for. It's possible that Yerin herself wanted someone to stop her."

"Do you think so?"

Sukyong-sunbae had said the same, but I could not share the thought that the overwhelmingly prideful, haughty blonde princess would want her lifestyle to end.

In contrast to my lackluster response, the nurse appeared to have great confidence that she was right. "So... You should win the match with Yeonji's help,

then try to convince Yerin to change her life somehow. Good luck!"

"Don't talk like you're not involved!"

She did say she didn't care who won the match. Just now, however, she sounded like she was siding with us...

"Because Yeonji--..." The nurse began, bearing a grim expression that read 'I don't want to be here', but her reply was cut short by the entrance of Yeonji and the three members of 'MoeRe'.

"I apologize that we are late. I was merely exchanging... unpleasanties with Miss Umji. She was being quite the persistent little peasant."

"It's Seo Yeonji!"

Yeonji and Yerin fought the moment they had entered the room. They appeared almost supernaturally calm otherwise, although their clubs were in the danger of being erased from existence.

They continued their violent, verbal combat; I must have missed the news when they announced that they were holding a martial arts tournament instead. The nurse finally broke her composure, her usually smooth face wrinkled from frowning, and gestured the two angrily. "Stop! ...You're acting like little kids. Stop fighting and sit down."

"You are right. It should be my responsibility, as an adult, to be mature and argue no longer with Miss Umji-- a kid, both in body and mind."

"It's Seo Yeonji! Wait, who's a kid?! You empty-headed blonde!"

"Wh-what did you say? I will not let your insult pass! Miss Sukyong, punish that little kid!"

"Hmph, if you're so confident, why don't you fight me yourself?"

"As you wish! Mister Yujin, bring me my blade!"

"...Please sit down, both of you."

The nurse and I sighed deeply in unison.

* * *

Soon,

After resolving the conflict, it took a... very long time for the members of the match to gather around.

On one couch sat the nurse and I, already looking exhausted before the match had begun, and Yeonji, whose energy seemed to be tapped from mysterious sources.

On the opposing couch was the butler, the maid, and the golden-haired girl. The three people, sitting together, painted a picture far more surreal than a masterpiece by Salvador Dali.

The combined picture was, exaggerating a little, a little short of complete disarray.

"Let us remind ourselves the rules of the match." said Yerin, radiating with energy comparable to Yeonji, and held up a print. "The match is the Otaku Word Chain, using the 'unique subject pool' rule. The match will be three-on-three, and team members are forbidden from communicating with each other during the match. It will be a Team Deathmatch, where we play until all members of a team are eliminated. Is that correct?"

"That's right." Yeonji nodded.

"The losers must dismiss their club, and take leave from the infirmary for the winner to freely use... Is that also correct?"

"That's right."

"Good. Then, we'll begin the match!"

"--Before that." As Yerin put the printed rule sheet away and prepared herself for the match, Yeonji halted her. "I want to make a small change to the rules, if you don't mind."

"...Changing the rules, at this stage?"

"It won't be a disadvantage to you."

"Hmph, then I will listen."

Yeonji cleared her throat loudly, and then stated her proposition. "I want to increase the time per turn to a minute."

"An entire minute?"

Normally, you need to give a valid word within fifteen seconds since the start of your turn. Yeonji had just asked if she could multiply that by four. Really, even when considering that the Otaku Word Chain game is far more difficult than a normal word chain game, one minute sounded like an incredibly long time. Why did Yeonji ask for a rule change without telling me about her plans beforehand?

Yerin looked briefly confused. Then, after presumably deciding that the change of rules would not impact her team's performance, she agreed, followed by a mocking grin, "Ha! Is that your attempt at remedying your miniscule knowledge? Very well, I will be merciful. Miss Sukyong!"

When Yerin raised her hands and called her, the maid beside her--- Sukyong-sunbae pulled out an object from her front pocket. It resembled a small clock, with a digital display showing '00.00'.

"...This is a digital timer. It is the same one that people use for speed chess." said Sukyong-sunbae, seeming completely oblivious to the fact that we had met on the day before. "After setting the starting duration, it counts down like a timer and will ring when the countdown reaches zero. If you press the button here, it will reset to the original time. Please press this as soon as you say a valid word, and pass it to the next player."

Sukyong-sunbae opened the back of the timer and put her fingers into the device, manipulating it. The timer's digital panel then read '60.00'.

The intensity of the situation quickly rose; I realized that my hands were moist from sweating. I straightened my posture and sat properly in preparation for the match-- though, in hindsight, that was completely unnecessary.

Yerin passed the timer to Yeonji, who was the first player in our rotation. She did a cursory glance around the room and shortly announced,

"Right, then! We will begin the match!"

The dreaded Otaku Word Chain game that I had feared for the past few days was... quite generic, other than the presence of a digital timer.

Yeonji's answers were usually from huge franchises, which eliminated a countless number of possible answers every turn. Some others did the opposite, choosing to use obscure titles that eliminated very little. Both teams were comfortably leading the game, at least at this stage. Remarkably, Sukyong-sunbae always managed to conjure up a valid answer without a second of thought; I realized that Sukyong-sunbae had not exaggerated about her skills yesterday.

"...'Saya's Music.' Next turn, please."

"...'Mayo Chicken.' Next turn, please."

"...'Mahou Shounen Matsuri*Magica.' Next turn, please."

I was relieved that the nurse's turn came after Sukyong-sunbae, not mine. Her overwhelming speed would have left me pressured and speechless every time.

Our order of turns was like this: Yeonji -> Yerin -> Me -> Sukyong-sunbae -> Nurse -> The butler -> Yeonji ... and this rotation was going to continue until the end of the game.

Yeonji knew that the order of turns would be a big factor in changing the outcome of this game, but without knowing the skill levels of the enemy, there was never a chance for us to strategically plan our turns. Instead, we randomized the order; fortunately, Yeonji was perfectly content having to bombard Yerin with answers that left little room for follow-ups.

After almost thirty seconds of silence, Yerin safely passed her turn with an answer: "...'My Distant Relative's Neighbor Totoro'. Next person!" As I thought, the match was becoming exceedingly difficult as time went on, now that the list of available words had become extremely short.

"Um... Uh, Ro-... 'Robot Takkyeon V'? Next turn!" I answered.

"...'Venusaur'. Next turn, please."

...But this maid-sunbae appeared totally unaffected by the smaller pool of answers. Wait, no one used anything from Po[[[]]mon before? How many words did she just eliminate with that answer?!

Every answer from Sukyong-sunbae was unpredictable, her subjects having no trend in generation or genre. If not for the nurse, who seemed to know every obscure visual novel title out there, we would have lost long before.

On top of that, no matter how much progress we've made into the match, she maintained her unnatural speed. If there ever was a ruling queen of the Otakus, she'd definitely be one. I began to question if Sukyong-sunbae was serious about wanting us to win; perhaps she was planning to confuse us before the match, after all.

No one had made a mistake yet, but our loss was easily predictable with the pace Sukyong-sunbae played. Even if the other two people were to fail and drop out of the game, it was meaningless if we couldn't beat Sukyong-sunbae.

There was... only one way to win, then-- The unbeatable move of the Otaku Word chain, the final boss of an obscure game called 'Ssuro-Gigan: The Last Vampire', the ridiculously long-winded 'Ssuro-Giganteni-Paraskulssu-[] [] [] () () () ()'!

...I still wonder what kind of idiot came up with that name, but it was nonetheless a name that was stuck in my head since my first loss against Yeonji. I had to look it up in Maver¹ afterward, too, just to make sure it wasn't a fluke.

As my research had found, it was a game-breaking answer that guaranteed victory when used, which somehow remained legal in the official game rules. It basically was the Excalibur of the Otaku Word Chain.

Using that answer was not going to be easy; it would only work if someone were to slip up and use an answer that ended with '-ssu'. But there was not a single opportunity yet; clearly, everyone in the game was knowingly avoiding it.

Patience. Someone was bound to slip up eventually. Late into the game... much later in the game, there's always someone who makes a silly, game-ending mistake! Until then... oh, until then--

"...'Futari wa Pedicure'. Next turn!' answered the other maid--... I mean, the butler, after a long silence since starting his turn. It became quickly apparent that he was the weakest player in this match, but he had held his ground thus far. His strange expression, which combined his permanent smile and his state of deep perplexion, somehow seemed to gnaw at my nerves.

¹ Reference to 'Naver', a famous Korean search engine/news website.

The next person in turn was... Seo Yeonji. She observed the timer that had begun counting down from sixty seconds, and she spoke--

"I got some things to say to you, Eun Yerin."

--directly to Eun Yerin.

"...?!"

A look of surprise surfaced visibly on everyone's faces; confusion crossed Yerin's face, as if she had just seen a polar bear in the South Pole. "...What are you doing? The only words that should come out of your mouth should be a name that starts with a 'Ure-' sound. Do you mean to forfeit this game?"

"You know, you've been making weird noises like 'Ugh!' or 'Argh!' before giving a valid answer." Yeonji replied immediately without batting an eye. "Only the members of the same team can't talk to each other, remember? Whatever else I do meanwhile, I just have to give a valid word that starts with 'Ure-', right?"

She continued, "Listen, Korea's view on the Otaku culture is pretty terrible right now. It's all thanks to the media trying to exaggerate and make news, or some Otakus doing stupid things; like the time when a guy brought a real weapon to 'Seoul Comic Mart' convention as a part of his cosplay, or people who publically wear Kimonos on our national holidays. Don't you agree? 'Eureka Ten'!"

Making the end of her minute-long speech, done in a single breath, she gave an answer and passed the timer to Yerin with a couple seconds to spare. That was too close.

"What-..." Yerin became speechless, but soon recovered when the timer in her grasp came to her attention. "You... Are you saying I am acting like them? 'Tenshi Muyo'! Next turn!"

Movement lingered in Yerin's lips as if she had unspoken words remaining. She did not speak further; rather than wasting any energy dealing with Yeonji's sudden outburst, she seemed to be quietly determining if this was another one of Yeonji's deceptions. It was probably a wise move; I had no idea what she was trying to do, either.

Under the collective, trained gaze from the others in the room, Yeonji let loose a furious torrent of words as soon as the timer made its way back to her. "Aren't you,

though? You 'recommended' a bunch of porn games to your classmates, and you forced them to do all sorts terrible of things! That's just going too far beyond the line. Do you even know why we keep our hobbies to ourselves? 'Mental Magica'."

"They weren't porn games! They were visual novels! They were for all ages!" Yerin replied, making a defense that was far too often told by Otakus. She became flustered at Yeonji's blunt choice of words, but she remained reasonably calm. "Keeping everything to yourselves? Hah, don't make me laugh! Peasants like you are merely cowards who cannot be prideful of your hobbies! Why do you feel ashamed about being an Otaku? Your meek attitudes are ruining the image of Otakus, not us! 'Ika Musuko'!"

The timer rotated back once more.

"We're the ones doing it? That's the biggest joke yet. How are Clotakus supposed to worsen anything, when we're completely unnoticed to others? You people are the only ones affecting anything, and that's a fact. You asked why can't we be proud of ourselves? Have you seen what's going on in Korea right now? The moment you carry the 'Otaku' label, you're going to suffer for it forever. You could be bullied by anyone who knows of it. And you're telling me to be more open about being an Otaku? 'Densha Onna'!"

"Suffer for having a label? And get bullied for it? Would there be a reason to get bullied if you are sociable, and have other positive qualities to offset it? To me, you are making an excuse to cover your ineptitude in maintaining a social life. Look at me, I have been open about being an Otaku for the past three years; have I ever been bullied even once? 'Natsume's Book of Enemies'!"

Another rotation.

"Ha-ha, you're getting everything wrong! You were never bullied, all because you're from the damn Eunsung family. You got your money, your power, and your looks from them. Who in their right mind would try to harm you? And what about all the other Otakus who have none of the things that you have? Are you sure they, in their position, can do the same things that you're doing? Don't flatter yourself. 'Kamisama no Notechou'."

"Hmph."

Yerin's blue eyes glittered. She was beginning to understand what Yeonji was trying to do.

Is this supposed to be... BBC's 60 Seconds? Whenever it was their turn, they got to argue however they wanted in the sixty seconds that they were given, as long as they gave a valid answer at the end. They effectively created a match of their own within the Word Chain game, held between only Yeonji and Yerin.

Yeonji had some thoughtful, well-structured arguments for herself, as if she had prepared it beforehand-- she probably did, actually-- but the bigger surprise was that Yerin hadn't faltered yet under Yeonji's relentless verbal assaults.

"You must understand... I have never once believed that having wealth or power has any matter in being an Otaku. Even if I were a humble peasant, I would choose to continue this lifestyle. I never doubted that this was the right path." stated Yerin, claspng her hands on her chest for emphasis. "A lowly peasant like you would not understand why I have gotten on this path. You have no idea what Miss Sukyong, Mister Yujin, and I have went through in these past years. I would like you to stay quiet when you have no clue what you are talking about. 'Chobits'."

"...Nyu." squeaked Yeonji, breaking her confident, upright posture, distraught by Yerin's powerful discourse.

Since Yeonji was the type to enjoy arguing over the Internet all day, she likely started the argument with great confidence that she would win. But Yerin's rebuttals struck at Yeonji's arguments in unconventional ways-- rather than pure logic, her arguments stemmed from her firm resolution in the past, from the time when she saved Sukyong-sunbae and her brother from being bullied. It was also how the MoeRe came to be, as Sukyong-sunbae had mentioned.

Eun Yerin had chosen to openly embrace the stigma to help her friends.

Her path as a 'Pubtaku' began with full justification of her cause-- and three years had gone by without a chance for anyone to point out her wrongdoings.

And, even now, everything she had done up to this day might still be justified in her mind.

She believed that she was on the side of good, her actions correct and just; her past told her so. She let that belief guide her life, a belief that was deep-seated, like an aged tree spreading its roots on her mind; nothing that Yeonji or I could do could change her now.

"..."

What's gotten into Yeonji, anyway? No matter how interesting this argument had become, it was entirely separate from the match itself. Even if Yeonji won her little debate, it would make no difference if Yerin's team had won the Word Chain game.

And there was the possibility that Yerin could have ignored her outright. Why did Yeonji start the debate without telling me about it beforehand?

I looked at her out of curiosity. Yeonji appeared suppressed by Yerin's last rebuttal, and strangely, she seemed to be throwing quick glances in my direction every now and then. But, before I could ponder the question of 'What does she want?' The match was already taking a turn for the worse;

"...'Tatami Universe'. Next turn, please."

"...'A Rooster into the Wild'. Next turn, please."

"...'Occult University'. Next turn, please."

While the two girls' exchange spiraled out of control, MoeRe's Ace, Sukyong-sunbae, asserted her dominance over the actual Word Chain game, bombarding our team with quick answers.

"...'All the prisoners in this prison are beautiful ladies, so my life as a warden is in danger!' ...Next turn."

Even the nurse was starting to take a very long time with her answers, and yet the timer never seemed to stay in Sukyong-sunbae's hands for longer than a second. This was getting dangerous.

...What the heck is up with that title, anyway? It was amazing how the nurse still had names to pull from her repertoire of ridiculously obscure visual novels, but disregarding that--

"Stop acting like you're better than us. Aren't you just saying that because you've never been bullied before? You're not in any position to judge us, when we have to face all kinds of crap for being an Otaku! 'Ibara no Jou'!"

"If you are afraid of being ousted, you should be confident about who you are, instead. When an Otaku gets negatively viewed, that is only because they are small in numbers! If you were to stop being cowards and band up publically, you would not be bullied in the first place. Is it not ultimately you people who are ruining the Otaku's place in this country? 'OreOto'!"

Their fight didn't seem like it was going to end anytime soon.

Yeonji's jabs against Yerin were as fierce as Sukyong-sunbae's answers in the Word Chain, but Yerin had always found a way to settle their debate back to its starting point.

"Nyu--"

Yeonji became increasingly tired, her attempt at an argument making no progress. Heavy breaths escaped from between her lips.

"--Uuu."

Again, she shot a glance at me.

Her glance was full of despair, like the eyes of a kitten stuck up on a tree with no way back down. She... looked like those times after school, whenever she wanted something to eat, at the cost of my wallet's life.

...She wanted my help, huh?

I mean, it was natural that I should have done something there, since Yeonji and the nurse carried the game this far. But what did I have that can help our game? As for helping in the Word Chain itself, it was flat-out impossible for me to do something about Sukyong-sunbae, who was radiating a powerful Otaku aura by just sitting there. Nuh-uh.

Then the only option I had was helping Yeonji win against Yerin in their debate, even though I still had no idea what kind of help that would ultimately be.

...And, Yeonji, the (self-proclaimed) famed keyboard warrior, needed help from a civilian? Overlooking the clear violation of the Geneva Agreements, I still had nothing to say that could help Yeonji...

...

...

...Except for that one thing.

Yeonji clearly said it yesterday. 'The only way we can have equal footing against

the Pubtaku is to show how the Otakus are targeted in our society'.

Like the time when I had posted those large walls of text, filled with my shame, followed by Yeonji quickly nabbing it and posting it everywhere...

Was Yeonji expecting me to do that again, and here?

And does that mean... she knew that I was the one who posted it all along?!

"Oh, man..."

My face began burning red. I felt my stomach acid climbing up my throat. Yes, it was true that my tragic experience had a good chance in shaking up Yerin's baseless belief, but...

...It's waaayy tooo embaaarrassinnnggg--!

How could I not be embarrassed at that idea? I was essentially going to be telling her 'Hey, I was quite the loser once!'. No one could do that!

And what did I have to gain if I won the debate for Yeonji? Their debate had no effect on the outcome of the match. What was my incentive for coming out with an uncomfortable story in front of these girls? It wasn't going to happen, no way. It was too bad for Yeonji if she was expecting me to use that story since the beginning, but I had a line that I was not willing to cross.

I carefully evaded Yeonji's glances, suppressing the subconscious reminiscence of my embarrassing past. But Yerin was speaking again.

"Like I have said before, you only hide yourself because you are weak and cowardly. If you are assuming that you are finding trouble solely for being an Otaku, without realizing your own faults, you are everything that is wrong with this society."

Ow.

Yerin's words became a thorn that pricked at my past.

"If you know of anyone who had been bullied solely because of the Otaku label, and isn't a social reject otherwise, then tell me. Of course, you could not know of someone who does not exist!"

More words damaged my psyche before the previous wounds could heal.

"Those worthless people who can't take care of their own body, and end up being morbidly overweight or terrifyingly bony... Really, it shames me that they are Otakus like I am. Why should I care that those lowly peasants are having a difficult time? 'Yoshinaga-San Chi no Goburin'."

"...Erk."

Hearing Yerin's pompous speech, I felt something crawl around my throat, itching to get out. And then, when Yerin casually passed over the timer with a victorious, remorseless smile--

"...You're wrong."

The words escaped my mouth on their own before I could control myself.

"...?"

Surprised by my entrance into the argument, Yerin glared, her long eyelashes batting. I did not have the time to mind her glares; I had to speak up now.

"How the hell do you explain Sukyong-sunbae, or that guy?" said I, forming the thoughts deep within my heart into a voice.

"...What do you mean...?"

"If you think no one gets any trouble for just being an Otaku, then how do you explain those two? Are you saying they're worthless social rejects, too? 'Rean's Feathers'."

"!"

Yerin's mouth shut close, drawing a horizontal line between her lips. She fixed a glare with a clear hostility; she must have understood my intentions.

"Miss Sukyong and Mister Yujin... never received proper education when they were young, so to be honest, they never had the academic abilities to enter Eunsung normally. There may have been some immature students who hated them for that fact, but they had used the Otaku label as an excuse to bully them. If anyone is at fault, it was mine for trying to keep them in the school with me."

"...Is that so?"

They were bullied not because they were Otakus, but because they lacked proper education, which shouldn't affect how sociable or likeable they are...?

"Of course! Do you really believe that, in this day and age, people would be bullied for what they enjoy? What are you trying to say?" replied Yerin, brushing her golden hair back, a hint of anger embedded in her movement.

...Alright, I got it.

Why Yeonji led the match into this direction, and why Yeonji wanted my help-- I understood now, and realized what I had to do. The reason Yeonji entered this silly match had nothing to do with ending their club in the first place-- that wouldn't affect how Yerin lived her life afterward. No, the true reason was to end her life of the 'Pubtaku Queen' altogether.

If we'd win the match and the MoeRe is demolished, that would be the end of it. Even if they couldn't make another club, that was going to be the end of the story. Yerin's belief was rooted in too deeply that the club going away would do nothing to prevent her from being a general pain in the ass to this school.

And so, the time limit was extended to an entire minute. With the extension, Yeonji had given us a chance to enter a long-winded debate to tell Yerin what she had wrought upon this school.

...And then, she asked for my help. The final strike to Yerin's belief, the 'real-life experience' that told the tragic tale of what it means to have the Otaku label here in South Korea, was requested by Yeonji.

"..."

That was to be expected from Yeonji, a brilliant mind even among Eunsung. I could almost praise her ability to strategize everything at every turn, but I earnestly wished that she would explain things beforehand; I could have taken longer to come to this realization.

Yes... Surely, if I made this blonde idiot come to her senses, no one would mind how embarrassing my story is...!

I made a decision.

"...Hear me out, Eun Yerin." I began, under an unnerving glare from Yerin, and hopeful, nervous glances from Yeonji. Talking to no particular audience, I told my tale,

"...It happened back in middle school..."

* * *

It happened back in middle school.

As Yeonji had mentioned in her story, I had a time when I was bullied for hanging around with an Otaku friend.

We had been the best of friends since we were in elementary school; it wasn't a relationship that I was willing to drop for a mere difference in hobbies.

"I've always been proud for having a friend like that."

Good looks, great marks, and monstrous athletic abilities-- Until the second year of middle school, no other descriptions were more suited for my friend. Always popular with the girls, too.

And then, the 'Otaku' label stuck. Complemented by such an outgoing, nothing-to-fear-attitude, everyone in the school quickly knew about my friend's new hobby.

...That could not end well.

I was the only friend left who was willing to continue our friendly relationship, and then I was influenced to become an Otaku myself. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't felt sorry for a good friend who quickly lost everyone who used to be called friends.

And the other reason why I stuck around was--

"...Becoming an Otaku didn't change anything."

Becoming an Otaku did not mean there needed to be a change in personality or attitude. Our lives remained as they were, other than how we talked, or thought-- the felt difference was basically going from saying things like 'Wow, I really like

your new headband!' to 'Whoa, that's the same headband that Chinami-chan had! Moe!'.

After I had sufficiently delved into the Otaku culture to maintain our relationship, no one else in the school was able to understand half the things we were saying... and ultimately, I gained the Otaku label myself.

...I have no excuse for what had happened. It was that time when I was crossing the line into becoming a full-fledged Otaku-- maybe within the 'Half-Otaku' (?) zone. Regardless of however I became lumped into that group, the unfamiliarity came from the bullying that began around us.

Why?

They never did that before. I was a good student, always aiming to be the top of the school at all times, and I knew that I was fairly respected and liked. Not even those 'bad kids' of the school crossed my path, and there I was, curiously becoming the target of bullying. Yet, I was still the top of the school, even after the Otaku label was acquired.

I had thought that, maybe, it was entirely the label's doing that my life had changed.

In hindsight, the actual reason should have been obvious--

"To actually flaunt that we're Otakus, to the point of advertising the fact-- that's what ruined everything."

--Every break that we had, we were sitting in the corner of the class, watching anime by ourselves.

--During gym classes, we made excuses to sit on the side bench while we read manga or light novels.

--When we talked, we discussed topics that no one else could understand, and what others talked about was just as big of a mystery to us.

If humans are social animals, then we lacked the trait to be human. We were different, so we were outcast, and then we were bullied.

Being a top student or being an athletic superstar had no significance if we weren't

sociable in the first place. They were irrelevant traits. The only defining factor that changed our lives was the way we blatantly exhibited how different we were from others.

"It wouldn't have been a problem if we kept everything to ourselves, but at the time, the thought never crossed me. That was what being a 'Pubtaku' led to, and it's the path you're on right now. 'Dream Drinker Merry'."

I passed the timer to Sukyong-sunbae, feeling my mouth and my throat getting drier every second-- then the timer returned.

"I'm... I'm not hiding because I enjoy acting like a coward. If I weren't an Otaku, and if I were instead a part of some other minority, I would still be a target of negative attention if I tried too hard to get accepted for it."

"...!"

"Did you say that all Otakus of this country should come out of hiding and group up? That's a huge mistake... How many of us do you think there are in all of Korea?"

Yerin flinched, a flash of discomfort crossing her face. She frowned with a flicker of confusion, and then answered, "...A-about... twenty million, including North Korea?"

"Twenty million?!"

That's way too many! Korea would be the land of Otakus at that level! Yeonji was wasting her time all along with her 'Otaku world' plan!

And why would you add North Korea into the equation? Other than Kim XXXX-Nam², is there a single Otaku in that country?! I deeply sighed, so much that I worried for the safety of my lungs.

"I should tell you, if we had every Otaku in Japan come over to South Korea, we would still be the minority of the population. We're never going to have any voice in this country."

² Kim Jong-Nam, the oldest son of the late Kim Jong-Il, who was famous for using a fake passport to visit Disneyland in Japan. There were unconfirmed rumors that he frequently visited Akihabara.

"Th-that can't be..." muttered Yerin, bearing a look of shock. I began to suspect that Yerin had been thinking that Japan was full of Otakus. ...Japan, the Land of Otakus? Sounds terrifying.

Realizing how terribly deep she was into her fantasy, I continued. "Being a Clotaku is a natural defense to survive in this country. It means to be able to easily make friends with everyone you meet, and every Otaku should learn to be one."

It was the final realization I had before sending my best friend off to a different school. My friend's final words of regret were the catalyst: 'If I had thought about being on friendly terms with everyone earlier, I might not have to transfer to a different school...'

Looking back, for the two years I've spent in my middle school, I haven't made any other friends. If there was ever a reunion, I would have no reason to go. I've always reassured myself that I don't need any friends as long as I have my best friend with me, but it did not take a while to regret that decision.

"Ugh... Sh-shut up!" screamed Yerin, breaking out of the shock that had kept her mouth sealed. She tightly gripped onto her timer as if to break it, and angrily continued, "We are not like you weak-willed peasants! We have no need for relationships with commoners. Such minor inconvenience can be excused through Eunsung's power! With Miss Sukyong and Mister Yujin by my side, we'll forever continue to live this way! 'Chi no Togainu'!"

"...Ugh."

What a scary thing to say.

She was well beyond the domain of 'speaking nonsense', and crossed over into the territory of 'indecipherable'. Her argument became increasingly baseless, and it seemed that she had forgotten the part where she had mentioned that having power has nothing to do with her lifestyle. Well, there's nothing wrong with planning around what you have-- However,

"But what if your family's company suddenly went bankrupt?"

"What are you talking about?!" yelled Yerin, forgetting to maintain her ladylike posture and tone. She grew pale, which was unsightly due to her already pale skin.

"Or, what if, you pass away before your two friends? How are they going to survive

this world without your help?"

"...Nngh."

I then came to a grave realization that I had given away how much I knew of their secret, but Yerin was not at a state where she could mind the odd peculiarity.

"So, Eun Yerin, I am telling you..."

The show was now reaching its climax. I needed to say something that would end everything here.

Just like her, I became an Otaku to be able to stay with a beloved friend. I could talk to her confidently, knowing that our levels were equal.

"You are... making a huge mistake, 'Because I Don't Like You at All, Onee-San'!"

"...!"

...The timer was running out, so I had to add my answer at the end of that sentence. Unfortunately, the drama was completely demolished by the absurdity of the combined sentence. But anyway...

I wonder, for the three years that she acted her villainous role, if there was a single person who had told her that she was doing the wrong thing.

Yerin's face contorted. Her head dropped down like a lifeless doll, bearing a pained expression as if poison was coursing through her body.

"Kuh-- Ugh... Nngh..."

She rapidly looked left and right, panicking like a little animal that realized that the ship was about to sink. Her lips repeatedly opened and closed back, but no further words were heard.

""Mayoi Wanko Overrun'!"

"Huh?!"

Before Yerin could recover and form a proper response, the timer quickly returned, much to her chagrin. Yeonji wasn't the one to pass up the opportunity to kick Yerin

while she was down; she began giving her answers at a pace that closely followed Sukyong-sunbae's speed.

The timer was ticking down.

"Oh... Oh, no..."

Yerin looked distraught and pale; she was staring at the timer in her hands, unable to form an answer for neither the game nor myself.

Her values that she held onto for the last three years were crumbling, along with her concentration for the game. She blankly stared at the timer, while nervously biting her lips.

But she was only given a minute.

Hurried by the rapidly changing symbols on the digital display, her lips slowly opened to make way for an answer...

"...Ru- 'Run, Nerossu'... ..?!"

"!"

Her lifeless voice shifted into a scream at the last syllable; she must have realized her mistake before the final syllable had left her mouth. I didn't need to see her widened, wavering eyes, or her face turning a sick shade of purple, to take notice of her trouble.

'Run, Nerossu' was an interesting title; the name ended with the syllable 'Ssu-'.

It was a critical mistake, one that would bring out the unbeatable answer in the very next turn, resulting in their guaranteed loss. The room's atmosphere froze, a cold feeling of tension cooling down the heat from the previous debate. It caused a silent disturbance in the room that was so powerful, I could almost see its physical manifestation. Everyone in the room surely realized the importance of her mistake.

Eun Yerin did not want to give up her club for nothing; this mistake could not have been made normally. She needed more time to recover from my last message to her.

"Ugh...!" groaned Yerin, closing her eyes tightly. It was too late for her to say that

she meant to say a different answer, and even if she could, her pride would not allow her to make such an excuse.

With a defeated look, she tiredly passed the timer into my hands.

"..."

I breathed deeply and received the timer. It felt far heavier than I last remembered.

Alright.

I had the opportunity to say the unbeatable answer, knocking Sukyong-sunbae out of the match, and thus guaranteeing our victory. With their ace player gone, we had the advantage of numbers, and there was no way we were going to lose.

I took my time.

I looked at Yerin first.

"...Ngh-."

She was paler than before, her teeth clenched in anguish. Her gripped fists rested rigidly on her knees, and her eyes, a hateful spiral of blue, were pointed towards me. She seemed to have embraced the fact that she was going to lose the match, but her face told that she was not yet ready to give up. Though she may have lost the argument, she was not giving up the word chain game; she was convinced that she was not yet... 'lost'.

That was to be expected.

She held onto her belief for the last three years. Thirty minutes of effort should not be enough to change her life forever. Though we may have won the game, our goal of ending Yerin's lifestyle as the 'Pubtaku Queen' would be forever lost.

"..."

Then...

I looked at the nurse and Yeonji, sitting by my sides.

I noticed that they did not have much time, that they could not continue if the

match dragged on. I prayed for them to hang on a little longer. After all, I had a few more things to say to Yerin.

I looked at the timer; I hadn't much time.

I began uttering the magic answer that would end this match--

"Ssuro-..."

10. Epilogue

A few days after the match between the Moe Research Club and the Clotaku Club,

Today was the same as any other day, spending our free time after school in the little room within the school's infirmary that we called 'our club', doing whatever we could excuse as 'club activities'.

...But really, we weren't doing any more than what we'd usually do when we're not together. On the other side of the room was Yeonji, hogging the big couch by herself, rolling around and reading a light novel. The nurse was playing visual novels on her computer, as usual-- maybe a week before, she was at least mindful of our presence enough to wear headphones, but now, her laziness surpassed that point and we had to endure every single indecent sound effect coming from her computer.

...This place couldn't be any more nerdy.

Having observed the two maintain the status quo of the club, I returned my attention to the PXP in my hands. Any effort to change this dreadful atmosphere was a waste; only Yeonji could make progress in this club by dropping her light novel and starting off with an 'Alright, let's do something!'

Whatever went on in Yeonji's head, she always had an explosion of terrifying creativity whenever she'd finish reading a light novel, which always led to suggestions for new club activities that were obviously going to end in tragedies.

Thus the final sum of our 'club activities' boiled down to Yeonji thinking up crazy new ideas, and me stopping them from happening each time.

...This isn't a healthy lifestyle.

Anyway, as demonstrated by our continued club activities, it should be obvious that our match from several days back resulted in our victory.

To tell the truth, it wasn't thanks to the 'magic answer'; in the final moments of that heated debate, my answer ended up not being the 'Ssuro-Giganteni-Paraskulssu-- [][]]()())', but instead 'Ssuro-Gigan the Last Vampire'. In other words, I used the name of the game instead, thus disabling the magic answer for the rest of the game.

I followed up with more arguments with Yerin, who was then not in any shape to continue the game. I hounded her until she gave the game up on her own, forfeiting her team from the match.

It was my first time winning a serious debate by myself-- against a girl, especially.

...Well, I suppose Yeonji helped out by joining in the hounding, akin to a vulture swooping down on a corpse. Her final blow to our debate was when she brought up that Yerin was a Clotaku, too, though limited to her own bedroom.

As Yeonji had discovered, Yerin's blonde hair was due to a wig, and Sukyong-sunbae and her brother worked six days a week. These two facts, together, somehow meant that Sunday was left free for Yerin to drop her ladylike act, thus exposing her 'normal' self...

...Which was completely nuts, even for Yeonji, so I became pretty sure that Yeonji had already infiltrated the Eunsung mansion last Sunday.

Yerin became completely broken after the match, since all of her deepest secrets were exposed, and we had shown her how wrong her beliefs were. She was bawling her heart out and she even forgot to maintain her ladylike act; it wasn't easy comforting her until she'd stop crying.

Even Sukyong-sunbae gave a condescending look that read 'I told you to win the match, not to completely crush her'.

In summary, Yerin lost the will to continue the match after our debate, and so we were able to keep our club alive.

After that match, she had begun changing her attitude, as mentioned by the nurse as an off-handed remark. One time, she attended her class without her wig, and no one was able to recognize her. Huh.

Yerin's regular harassment of her classmates had stopped, too, since she was no longer the Pubtaku Queen. With that taken care of, the principal was crying tears of joy for having narrowly dodged the wrath of Eunsung.

There was a good ending for everyone.

Changing the topic-- after our match, Yeonji was surprisingly kind enough to give me words of praise. I know I deserved it, though: I risked being embarrassed to death by doing what I did back then, so it was natural that I received praise from her. It was my plan to follow up with a demand that she should be the one buying me lunch for once... but what she had said next caught me off-guard.

"But seriously, I was so surprised when you gave your speech!"

"...Surprised? Why? Back in that debate, weren't you constantly looking at me like you needed me to help? Why's it surprising that I stepped in?"

"Nyu--gh." Yeonji groaned, her face reddening. She violently threw her arms around in front of her, as if that would hide her red face. She stammered, "Wh--what are you talking about? I wasn't doing that! Don't be stupid! Who'd look at you? How disgusting! Weren't you the one who was too busy looking at me to think about the match?"

"What kind of nonsense is that?!"

As expected of Seo Yeonji, she was beyond the concept of merely disagreeing with my words; she moved right into blaming everything on me. Her aptitude in redirecting blame was scarily amazing.

She did not seem to want to admit that she was looking at me during the match (Why? What's the problem with that?!). She coughed, which was obviously faked, and continued, "Ahem. A-anyway, I'll admit you did a good job today. All good deeds must be rewarded, even if it's by an idiot who doesn't have anything better to do than stare at the club president."

"...Were you trying to praise me, or make fun of me?"

And if you want to reward me, give me something tangible! After all the lunches and snacks you ripped off of me, you expect some words to make up for it? Dream on, Yeonji.

"I was especially amazed how you used the story I told you yesterday, as if you were the one who wrote it! I couldn't believe it was something you thought up. Your act was perfect! Ten out of ten!"

The strangeness of her words struck me, interrupting my relaxing moment of thinking various insults to say to Yeonji. Wait... what did she just say?

"...As if I were the one who wrote it?"

"Yeah!" Yeonji grinned widely and nodded, "I almost believed that you'd been bullied before! Maybe it's because of the way you look? No one would believe me if I had said that story instead. You find your way to make yourself useful in unexpected situations, you know that?"

"No, no, no, no, no... Wait, just hold on for a moment..." Panic struck, and I began stammering incoherently to myself.

There was probably some slander somewhere in her words, but ignoring that-- what did she just say? She was talking about... my story that I told Yerin, right? I thought Yeonji was pressuring me into revealing my story to Yerin, and... she thought I was acting? That it seemed real? What?

"Okay, uh... Let me ask you something, just in case."

"Hmm? What?"

"That post you told me about yesterday... Do you know who wrote it?"

"Nah."

"No?!"

You didn't know?!

Blood rushed to my head and my neck stiffened. Yeonji looked at me curiously, as if I were the odd one in this conversation.

"I'm not a reaper from Death N***! How am I supposed to tell who wrote what on the Internet? And the post got deleted too quickly, I never had the chance to check his IP. I only had enough time to save the content."

Yeonji cursed under her breath as she audibly regretted that she never had the chance to track the writer down. Was she saying that she wanted to track me down with my IP alone?! Such hellish words did not fit her cute face.

"...Aw, really..."

Life fled from my body after Yeonji's twist on the events. ...Though, while it turned out that the embarrassing show I've put on yesterday was entirely my fault, I was relieved that Yeonji was still in the dark about my tragic past.

"... was gonna ... keep it ... my own."

"What?"

"...Nothing." Yeonji replied back in whispers. I thought I had heard her grumble about something quietly. That's not polite, Yeonji.

"Nyuu-n..." She groaned. And, a moment later, she bounced up with her eyes shining brightly, "Wait, I almost forgot! I was going to punish you for something, too!"

"Wha-?!"

Out of instinct, my body jumped back away from Yeonji, who was now bearing an evil grin. Yeonji quickly paced forward to match my movement, pointing at me rudely.

"Back when the blonde idiot made a mistake, why didn't you boot that maid out of the game with the magic answer? Do you realize how difficult it was for me?!"

"I, uh..."

Yeonji's pointed finger repeatedly prodded my chest, digging through the shirt.

"W-wait, if you're talking about that, uh, it's that, just, I thought we shouldn't stop at ending Yerin's club, but go further and stop her from being the Pubtaku Queen entirely! Wasn't that the reason you increased the time limit in the first place? No?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" She crushed my great excuses with a single reply, "I increased the time limit as an excuse to argue with her, but I never told you to waste a great opportunity to win! We're lucky that she quit the game on her own, 'cause we would have died to that maid otherwise! This is a severe crime, fitting of capital punishment!"

"...Sure."

It seemed to be Yeonji's code that good deeds must be rewarded with simple praises, while crimes should be punished with immediate execution. I should really be thankful that she didn't write our laws.

I did my best to escape her by reassuring her that we'd won regardless, but changing her mind was fruitless... as usual. She hassled me all the way back home, not wasting a single moment to demand that I buy snacks for her at every turn. By the time we had to part ways, she insisted that we exchange our phone numbers, likely to bother me further.

...I still get chills from thinking of her wide grin after she got my number.

In the end, after everything that had happened to us, we were able to continue our daily lives at the Clotaku Club.

Except for one thing.

"Alright, now..."

Yeonji closed her light novel with a loud clap. She began to awkwardly wriggle away from the couch that she'd been laying on, resembling a cat that got stuck in a mousetrap while trying to get the mouse out.

"We'll start by discussing our club activities for today," spoke Yeonji, bearing a displeased look.

That was new.

She sounded as if we always start our day in the club with discussions, but we had never done that before. I was quiet about it, however, since this seemed like a dangerous moment to raise objections.

"Our topic of discussion today is--"

Yeonji crossed her arms and sat upright on the couch, delaying her next words with several different annoyed expressions, and then finally continued,

"Why the hell are they in our club?!" She screamed, pointing angrily.

On the receiving end of Yeonji's pointed finger was a certain blonde girl, watching anime on a humongous wall-mounted flat-screen television... and her two servants.

Simply put, Yerin and her maid and the butler were watching anime on an 82-inch television.

"I don't understand this! I won't accept this! I was wondering why this room was smelling like sore losers, and here they are! What did you do?!"

...Sorry, it was my fault. How could I not open the door? There were a bunch of adults wanting to be let in so they could install a brand new television in here!

"I can't believe this! You opened the door for a stupid television! This week's secret code was 'A Certain' to 'Scientific Pulse Rifle'! Why didn't you ask for the password?"

"...Stop with the passwords already." I'd rather die than face the embarrassment of saying 'Say the password if you want in!' to a bunch of strangers. "Wait, why are you yelling at me? You were really happy when you saw the television, too! You were even dancing around with your hands in the air!"

"Wh-who danced around?!" Yeonji hopped up and down angrily, shouting. "I'm okay with the television, but I'm definitely not okay with those three! Nyuu-- ...Is this what they mean by 'bundling' in marketing schemes, where they sneak in stuff that don't sell well with the popular merchandise?"

"They were the ones who bought the television for us."

"Nyuu-rgh! Those filthy bourgeois pigs! Fascists! Enemy of the laborers! Burn them!"

Yeonji, once again, displayed her great talent of switching blame.

"Hmph... Could you please quiet down, if you don't mind?" Yerin interrupted us as she paused the show, just as I was about to stop Yeonji myself. Yerin turned around and continued, "If you weren't trying your best to resemble a cat in heat, I may be able peacefully enjoy this show! If you have an ounce of manner in you, could you please shut your mouth for once, Miss Seo Umji?"

"It's Seo Yeonji!" screamed Yeonji, "Why are you watching anime in here, anyway?! This is the Clotaku Club, and I am its president! If you want to stay here, then you'll need my written consent! Get out, but leave the television behind!"

She was blatantly honest about her desires.

Yerin sat back and relaxed in response, amusedly watching Yeonji flail her arms around angrily. "Oh, my... I did not know that. Then, the two other members of this club also received your written consent, yes?"

"Th-they're the members of this club! They don't need it!"

"Is that so? Then, we shall join this club."

"It's not as simple as 'joining this club'--!"

"Then we will instead become members of this club."

"That's the same thing!"

"...Tell me, what sort of qualifications do I need to become the president? When will be the next election?"

"You're looking to take over my spot already?! I'm not giving it to you!"

Yeonji slumped over with that last shout, having expended all the energy that was stored in her miniscule body.

Yerin smirked and brushed her golden hair around. She explained, "Did you not explain that your club is for the closeted Otaku of this school? Then, there should be no issues if I join, I believe."

"...A Clotaku? You?" croaked Yeonji, lifting her head in surprise.

Yerin nodded slowly and gracefully. "Of course. My 'MoeRe' met its end after our clash... and I wish to learn how to start a peaceful, social life with the peasants of this school. Thus, I will no longer be a Pubtaku."

"But that doesn't make you a Clotaku!"

"Of course it does." Yerin replied immediately as if she had prepared herself for this line of conversation. "I have no other place where I may practice my hobbies, so the Clotaku Club will have to do. An Otaku only in the Clotaku Club-- quite clearly, that makes me a Clotaku!"

"Nyuu---gh!" squirmed Yeonji, gritting her teeth.

After smirking in satisfaction, Yerin turned to me to give a pleasant smile, "You told me that every Otaku needs to learn how to get along with non-Otaku people, yes? I have made an appearance here as an acceptance of your advice. You should feel honored."

"I don't even-..." I don't really care about honor-- just don't make it sound like I was the one who brought you people in here! See, Yeonji is now glaring at me like she's looking at a traitor!

I did my best to face away and avoid eye contact with Yerin and her gang. Perhaps to recognize my effort, Yeonji decided that taking care of an outsider was more important than dealing with the traitor.

"A-anyway, you can't stay here! I'm going to look like an Otaku too if you hang around with us! I don't want that, ever!"

It was a harsh comment, considering that all of us were Otaku. Unsurprisingly, Yerin looked distraught and her continued smile became obviously forced. She groaned, "Kuh-... Ugh... D-do not worry a single bit, you insolent peasant! You will be invisible to me outside of this club! You are overstating your position if you think you can be at my level!"

"...Didn't you say you were giving up on acting like you're a queen?" I sighed. It must have been a false rumor that she was showing up to her class without her wig or her colored contacts; I feared that she might have gotten worse.

Yerin scoffed at my question. "I will only act in here. I am controlling myself more in my classes; I do not need help from you. You should not underestimate my ability for self-control."

She seemed to be saying that she'd keep all of her urges and emotions within her, and then let them out all at once while in this club. ...She was living a tiring life.

"Well... That sounds okay, right? If we're only going to meet here after school for club activities, I don't think we'd have any problems." I suggested, tired of the continued bickerings between Yerin and Yeonji. Not only would it take further time and effort to kick Yerin out of the club, the gigantic television would also have to go, which appealed to neither my greed nor my laziness.

"What did you just say?!"

...But Yeonji did not seem to share my thought. She screamed as soon as I sided with Yerin, and she began shouting and blabbering without giving me a chance to explain further.

And then the nurse joined in. "...I agree with what Injin said--."

"Nyu-u-t?! Wh-why do you say that?!"

"It sounds like it could be fun, you know?"

What sounds like it could be fun? The nurse had the face of a laughing theatre mask, ever since we had begun talking.

With the nurse's vote on Yerin staying, Yeonji became greatly saddened, and Yerin was now loudly laughing in contrast. "Fufufu... In the very least, the nurse and that pathetic peasant are wiser. Now, answer the opinions of your valued members, little girl! You should be honored that I am joining your stupid club! Be thankful!"

"Nyu-u-gh!"

Yeonji quivered in anguish at the rate of 400Hz, but she soon calmed down after progressively looking at Yerin, then me, and then the television. She seemed to have made a decision. "Phew... Well, whatever. I'm sure it'll be fine... Hmph, I really hate to say this, but I will let you stay in this club as an act of kindness."

"Why, thank you! As long as I am here, there will only be victory for this club! Look forward to what I will bring forth from this day on." proclaimed Yerin, proudly jutting forward.

Yeonji said nothing in response for a moment. She soon perked up after finding a better reply; "Heh, alright. By the way, I'm going to be collecting five hundred million Won every semester for club activities, so don't forget to bring it tomorrow!"

"Hah! That sort of money is spare change to m-- ...Wait, did you just say five hundred million?!"

"Every member in the club will pay for it, so it's only fair. There's only execution waiting for those who don't pay up! Of course, I'm paying too."

"What are you going to do for club activities with two and a half billion Won?! Are you trying to set up a publishing company?!"

"Huh? Oh, no, I'm only collecting five hundred million and twenty-four thousand Won in total."

"I'll be contributing almost all of it by myself! Everyone else is giving only twenty-four thousand?! Where is this imbalance coming from?!"

"Dear Customer, our policy has changed as of today, and we hereby collect fees based on your yearly income--"

"Progressive tax?! Do you really think I have any personal earnings?! Shut up!"

"Gee, why don't you just leave the club if that's a problem?"

"W-wait, something feels different about you again! I swear you were like this before..."

"Kukuku... Heh heh heh...."

"Kyaaaa--! D-don't come any closer! W-wait, you, that peasant over there, why aren't you putting a leash on this dangerous beast? Kyaa--!"



...And so,

After accepting three new members out of nowhere, our club grew to house five student members.

We now had enough people to meet the requirements of starting an official school club, and with Eun Yerin by our side, we could do it any time we wanted to.

If we really, really wanted to, we could also take over the principal's office like Yeonji mentioned (though it would feel like the end of the world for the principal, who's now currently sighing in relief that Yerin was no longer a job-threatening crisis for him).

I don't really think Yeonji wanted it at this point, though.

Even without a request to make this club official, we had a club room, a supervising teacher, a huge source of funding, and basically everything that we ever needed. We achieved the Otaku Paradise; what more could we ask for?

And most importantly...

Our club is the club for the closeted Otakus -- we are the Clotaku Club.

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